

W. KENNETH RICHMOND

POETRY
AND THE PEOPLE

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CHAPTER I

BRITANNIA STERN AND WILD

AMONG primitive peoples it is a custom to attribute the art of poetry to some unknown God. The explanation serves. Thus it is written that among Northmen this art was Odin's gift—a creature of cold earth and runic fire; and it is to him rather than to any Muses of the soft South that our island ancestry first owed its power of wondrous utterance, the ability to “unlock the word-horde”. Or perhaps it is to Freyja that the honour should be paid: Freyja, goddess of fertility, favourite of Norse skald and Saxon scop alike; her dwelling in the flowery Folkvangr, the common fields? Was not her favourite son himself a poet, his name Mardoll, signifying “Shining over the Sea”?

Over the sea. . . . The Romans had already made that journey and departed, leaving behind them their walled camps and empty pottery-work, dead relics of an occupation that was soon forgotten. No doubt the officers of Hadrian, tight-lipped men as they were, remembered the old Tuscan songs and their snatches of Catullus and Propertius, but even if they had not been so utterly reserved it is doubtful whether their classical lyric could ever have impressed those lowliest of natives, the Britons. What were Jove and Venus to the Celtic imagination? figures of stone, entirely devoid of mystery.

Ubi Romanus vicit, ibi habitat was the conqueror's boast: but there is no evidence to suggest that during his occupation he stooped to the plough or deigned to mingle with his British subjects. To the end he remained detached. Like the pseudo-Romans of more recent years he was at pains to leave behind him his monumentum aere perennius, his name engraved everywhere (in schoolboy fashion) to be a lasting mark of his brief tenure. He came, he saw, he conquered, but so far

as the literature of these islands was concerned he left almost no trace.

The same might be said of the Ancient Britons themselves if we were prepared to judge literature solely by its visible manifestations. But we are not willing to limit our judgment to the plain evidence of our eyes; indeed the whole aim of this book is to trace tendencies in our national poetry which have for the most part remained underground, to assess those major influences which, because they are largely unseen, are largely ignored. In this respect we cannot ignore the Celtic influence even though it is impossible for us to say much about it. It outlasted Romans, Saxons, Danes, and Normans alike: it survives to-day—and not merely in Ireland, Wales and the country of the Gaels.

The Ancient Britons, like all good peasant-folks, were bound to the soil, living in closely-knit communities. Every hamlet was a living group, consisting of nine tyddyns, each with its own smith, its own baker and, be it noted, its own song-maker. In those druidical times it seems that men did not live by bread alone. The poet's trade was deemed as necessary and inevitable as that of his fellow toilers: he was one with them and of them. His function may not have been exalted but it was a very real function—to promote joy, to help the social group to become articulate; and if thereby he achieved no special status, being neither better nor worse than his fellows, his work was none the less important. In primitive societies every man tended to be a craftsman: whatever the material with which he dealt—stone, clay, metal, hoe or harp—it became the medium through which he expressed himself; and to that extent all men were by way of being artefacts if not actually artists. The only difference was that the song-maker dealt with immaterials—words and music. From the beginning the two were wedded, the one necessary to the other, voice and verse. Ages before the first manuscript was penned, countless generations of unacknowledged minstrels delighted the ignorant common

folk, inducing them (much as the music-hall artiste of to-day does) to join in with the general festival. Too often we think of the inglorious village Milton as only a pleasant fancy, at best a rare phenomenon, whereas history shows that he was in fact a recognized member of every primitive community. Therefore we cannot forget the original contribution of the Celt.

So far we have peered only into the shadows of prehistory, however. If the Celt had formed the habit of joying in social song, so, too, had the invader Saxon; and the gods and legends which he brought shining over the sea first gave our literature its essentially Teutonic character. Long before Christianity had yet appeared, even before the act of rune-writing had ceased to be implicated in a dangerous magic, a warrior-farmer folk revelled in this naïve utterance, this "gift of joy", this gleeful singing. Their joined voices were raucous and ringing, a battle-cry throaty, mighty in sinews, yet prompted by that rude, primeval strength which was—and still might be—the lifeblood of English literature. Angles, Saxons and Jutes; Viking men, of pagan ancestry; fierce, self-reliant, bowing only to one dark power, the inscrutable Wyrð. Did they smile, or ever feel a moment's tenderness? Probably not; but they gloried in battle, exulted in celebrating war's grimness, lusted in mighty deeds. They were never more themselves than when they cried, "Let slip the dogs of war". Into the fray they ran, shouting and singing. At such times their very weapons made music: spears yelled, bows screamed and arrows sang. To the primitive mind everything was instinct with life and purpose and therefore highly expressive.

Let forth fly shower-flights of darts
Adders of battle arrows hard-tempered
From horn-curved bows. High they shouted
Warriors fierce in fighting; after whom flew the eagle
Famished for fodder all his feathers bedewed,
(—Grey was his garment singing his gore-lay
With horny beak hooked. . . .

But we anticipate. The old heroic poems, "Beowulf", "Waldhere", "Finnsburh" and such fragments of the Teutonic epos as are left to us, were the work of professional song-smiths—at any rate in the forms in which they have survived.

The Saxon scop and Norse skald occupied a position of some dignity, sat at the King's high-table, were richly rewarded. It is interesting (and maybe ominous!) to find the fifth- or sixth-century bard thus early aspiring to join the aristocracy, removing himself one step from the common herd. Yet however highly he thought of himself the scop always remained at heart a communal singer. If his own self-exaltation carried him away at times he always came to his senses, remembered his duty to his fellows high and low. Boasting was a recognized convention of the minstrel's style, yet he never forgot his real station:

Noble am I, an Ætheling friend of Earls,
I rest with the rich yet rank with the poor
Famous with all folk.

The Anglo-Saxons seem to have had few pleasures; fighting, drinking and song (even woman seems to have delighted them not!). Such relaxations as they did indulge in, however, were common: the meanest shared them, in the same way that they shared the mead-cup, sitting in the feasting hall cheek by jowl with their overlords. Bede's account of the origins of the first English poet to whom we can put a name,—Cædmon,—is illuminating:

He had not, indeed, been taught of men, or through men, to practise the art of song; but he had received divine aid and his power of song was the gift of God. . . . This man had lived in the world till the time he was of advanced age and had never learnt anything of poetry. And, though *he was often at a feast, when the time came to promote jollity and everyone took turn to sing with the harp*, he invariably arose

when he saw it approach and quitting the feast for shame,
went home to his house . . .

Reading between the lines, is not this eloquent of a rude and vigorous democracy in which there flourished a commonalty of spontaneous utterance? Poetry was the expression and the possession of every man. The lofty strain of the scop might give it a declamatory colouring, but its essential matter, its natural high-seriousness, sternness, and its intense melancholy were given it by ordinary working men. Even the princely "Beowulf" is itself no more than a folk-tale glorified!¹ Epic and Lyric alike came first from the people.

The true lyric is scarcely represented in what remains of Old English poetry. Possibly because it was primarily heathen or secular in inspiration the monkish scribes did not deign to perpetuate such trifles: possibly, also, the lyric did not come easily to the Saxon:² but a more probable explanation is that like all true folk-song it could only be transmitted orally. Being lowly it was not deemed worthy of the notice of those who could write. It perished with the language. In any case the Saxon mood and the harpist's style was more given to declamation than to the true singing voice.

To return to Cædmon. His first song, significantly enough, was of the Creation, how

The Lord eternal afterwards adorned
The earth for men . . .

The earth. One of the oldest, if not the very earliest of all Mercian alliterative verses is a ploughman's song of the soil:

Hale be thou, Earth mother of all men
Be thou fruit-bearing bounteous in God's bosom
Filled with fodder for Man's fare-need,

—which is really not unlike those exhortations with which some West Country farmers are still wont to address their orchard

¹ Cf. Wardale: *Old English Literature*. P. 88.

² *Ibid.* p. 11.

trees, wassailing them at Twelfth Night or Ascensiontide. Long before he thought to make a battle-song, the countryman addressed himself to the quiet soil on which his means of sustenance depended. The first poem was a prayer, a pagan (but wholly religious) plea for fertility, and from it sprang all the rest—songs of Mother Earth, muttered incantations, gnomes, superstitious aphorisms, charms against witchcraft. In the beginning art and magic were inextricably connected: and in the later chapters of this book it will be seen that this connection has always been retained as a necessary attitude of the peasant mind. Inevitably, poetry of this kind is of the earth, earthy, yet it was a sure instinct which led it to this unpremeditated, everlasting theme. In its embryonic stage poetry dealt with elemental things, fetishes . . .

Against the brown poison against the crimson poison
 Against thorn-blister against thistle blister
 Against ice-blister.

It existed in a darkling world, against a background of fearful mystery, the very burden of which was powerful enough to give it an oracular sense which later was to become all too rare.¹ Words had far more than surface significance; they were amulets against Fate.

The influence of this earliest pre-literature must be taken into account when we consider the nature of Old English authorship as a whole, whether it be the "native", pagan epos or the later religious verse: it is all, as Arnold said, the detritus of something far older. Rugged, harsh, pedestrian, it bears the marks of its heathen antecedents.

Ice-blister! It is a poetry close to the bone, answering directly the needs of simple men. Life was hard in Saxon times. If a man were to live he must needs labour and fight; and yet in so doing he could not help but feel his own helplessness,

¹ Cf. F. O. Matthiessen: *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot*. P. 36.

"Taboos are removed, but sanctions wither."

his immediate dependence on Nature. How often do these early poets stress the sternness of the struggle—the snow flint-flaked, the ice that shrunk all waters till the “brine was a bridge and the sea-way shone”, the storm, “cloud-smoke grey over gables, great noise on the earth”. The Seafarer bewails the starkness of the ocean-goer’s life:

. . . hail hurried in squalls.
 I heard nought save angry swirl of the sea,
 Ice-cold surges, at times the song of the wild-swan;
 My sole gladness the gannet’s lone crying,
 Moan of the sea-mew ’stead of mead-quaffing.

Remorseless earth and a cruel sea—such the beginnings of our rough island literary story. Elegiac, vatic, grey. The crude riddles and sententious gnomic verses which solaced the Saxon hinds seem, to our more urbane way of thinking, gratuitous, childish even; yet they have something which we perhaps have lost, an unfailing sense of the dignity of humankind.

One is poor an unfortunate man
 Yet is he wise in the ways of his mind.
 One is fine-featured fair of form.
 One is a minstrel maker of songs.
 One is an orator eloquent in words.
 One a great hunter of glorious beasts.
 One is a fowler skilled with the falcon. . . .

To each his attribute; and the poet, note, indistinguishable from the rest, as indispensable and yet as little to be remarked as any of them. Genius was not at that time restricted to the individual; its virtue did not reside in any single man, was not peculiar, not self-centred, certainly not puffed-up. Any man or every man had it in him to be a minstrel, just as any man might be a hunter or a falconer if only Wyrð willed or the mood moved him. Poetry was not as yet pigeon-holed, isolated from everyday affairs; it inhered in the fellowship of ordinary men. Naturally, being common it took the commonplace for its subject; and still found cause for wonder. The scop might sing

arms and the man, but his was the formal voice, the professional. Plain country folk treated of homelier things, plough or partridge, barn and barley. Their animist child-mentality was such as to endow stocks and stones with strange power of speech. Their very ingenuousness instilled the simplest of subjects with an all-pervading mystery and impressiveness. They had the child's love of playful riddles and they delighted in making little puzzle-poems, in which the unspoken question was always "What am I?":

Every day the dark wave flowed
And with its watery clasp me caught
And little inkling had I then
That at the mead-bench merriment
I, mouthless once, should speak and sing.

Answer: "A reed."

It is useless to ask, "Who made this or who wrote that?" Authorship of this kind is more than anonymous, it reaches back into the dimmest folk-lore, to old and happy far-off things beyond the ken of critic or historian; the manifestation of eras that are beyond recall.

By the time that a vernacular penmanship came to be introduced into this country (say the sixth century?), the format of alliterative, stressed utterance was already set with all its conventions of style, clipped rhythm, repetitiveness, clichés, diffuseness alternating with terseness, and the rest. Later poets did little or nothing to go outside or modify the conventional manner. That invention of modernity, the purely personal style, did not exist.

"What has Ingeld to do with Christ?" demanded Alcuin, sternly castigating the monks of Lindisfarne for their habit of mingling pagan songs with their religious hymns. The answer, of course, is, "A great deal". Whether the hero be Beowulf or Christ, whether the speaker be Deor or Cynewulf, poetry resounded to the same tones and was prompted by the same sentiments, moved to the same rhythms.

Aesthetic inspiration, as we know it, was unknown. Doubtless when the mead-bench grew uproarious there was "*hwyl*", (—trust the Welsh to have a word for it!) and who knows what fine impassioned flights were heard when warrior or worker rose in his drunken fit, driven to enthusiastic utterance by the potent liquor? Purple passages from men half crazy with drink, heard, never to be recorded. Such efforts were not without their influence, even so. They lived by their example, for of such was the true stuff of poetry, the raw material if not the finished product; lines intended not for the book but for the satisfaction of the countryman's ears—most of all for the satisfaction of the throat that uttered them. That such verse should be long-winded, contemptuous of sense and slight of content, was natural enough. The existence of a set style with only a minimum of observable rules meant that the singer was able to give voice to his mood almost without restraint. Once the bare rudiments of technique had been mastered anyone might stand up and improvise at a moment's notice. Expression was free, unshackled.

Subtlety of any kind was neither desired nor expected. There was nothing that even the meanest intellect could fail to appreciate, nothing but what was self-evident, familiar to the everyday life of everyone who sat there round the long tables. Poetry, in so far as it was conceived at all, was conceived communally, an entertainment that was as necessary an adjunct at a feasting as the roast venison or bull-horn beaker. If, from a literary point of view, the standard was not high, at least this versifying served a social purpose; and served it well. Everyone partook of it, or else knew that he was missing something—as the modern diabetic at his masonic dinner must sneak away when a rich dish or sweet rare wine is served.

Not that the Saxon's poetry was rich or rare. On the contrary; plain fare, raw meat, most of it, and plenty of roughage, satisfying only the full-throated appetite. It was intended to be bolted whole, with relish, nor was it ashamed of an occasional

belch now and then to help it along. It knew nothing of fastidiousness, for it had not learned to become discriminating. As often as not it was taken sportively, merely for the crude emotional stimulus which it afforded.

Criticism was unknown. Appreciation there must have been, but often the man with the harp was carried away with boastings of his own prowess in arms and rambled on in sheer defiance, regardless of the applause or impatience of his fellows. Their turn would come.

Inevitably verse of this kind tended to formlessness. In the whole corpus of surviving Anglo-Saxon poetry there is nothing which resembles a stanza structure, unless we except the vaguely strophic "Lament" of Deor. Verse of this kind may now seem to us tedious with its nigh-endless redundancies and its wearisome variations on a single outworn theme, but only because our way of life is so utterly removed from that which motivated it. Its fiery language is now no more than a burnt-out shell, dead ashes; yet though we are no longer in a position to feel the essential thrill of it, we can, if only in an abstract, intellectual sense, admit that it possessed a vast contemporary vitality and that in a very real way it must have been far more intimate, closer to the life of Everyman than is the cold print of the twentieth century.

Is this too great a claim? If it be objected that we deal too much by inference and conjecture, that we do not sufficiently limit ourselves to the recorded texts, our excuse must be that by so doing we can more nearly approach the truth than by adopting the strictly scholarly method. By far the greater part of Old English poetry has vanished, leaving no more visible trace than the sweep of bird's pinion in air. To ask, "Where are the songs of yesteryear?", may be a vain question: the point is that they existed. What percentage of them ever came to be transcribed we shall never know—probably only an infinitesimal fraction, and even of those only a few shreds have come down to us, barely enough to give us something of their

original wild flavour. They lived their life and then, as all good poetry eventually must, they came to dust. From first to last, though, their life was in the human voice. When none was there to record them, what else could they do but die with the breed of men who made them?

Mark further what the good Bede says of Cædmon:

All that he could learn by listening he pondered in his heart, and ruminating, as does a simple animal, he turned it into the sweetest of songs. His verse and music were so delightful to hear that even *his teachers wrote down the words from his lips* and learnt them.

Admittedly, the abbess Hild and Cædmon's other tutors may have deemed it necessary that his natural voice should undergo a course of training and that this ingenuous cowherd should receive some veneer of culture. Possibly they went so far, as to foist small Latin on the poor fellow: at any rate he must have imbibed a fair amount of second-hand Biblical knowledge, for we have it on Bede's authority that he later composed the long narrative poems, "Genesis" and "Exodus". Thus almost at the very inception of English authorship we find something akin to foreign influence creeping in, first forerunner of all those multitudinous cross-currents with which it was later to be trammelled. It must be admitted that from the outset it is impossible entirely to dissociate our native literature from Church-Latin scholarship—folk-lore from booklore. Many of the riddles existed first in Latin (—or were they Latinized?) versions. The later Cynewulf, perhaps the first English poet to develop anything resembling a distinctive style, was, we know, a man of quite considerable learning, judged by eighth-century standards; and the great Ælfred was himself something of a cosmopolitan, ever eager to have scholars about him, to exploit the erudition of stranger nations,—as if throughout his reign he felt rather keenly the backwardness of his own people. A real man of the people, an educationist before his time,

Ælfred remains, even after the passage of a thousand years, the true type of a king, the ideal Englishman.

All these half-conscious yearnings for alien cultures were as nothing, however, compared with the massive influence of the untutored, native tradition. Even where a poem exists only in the learned form given it by some monastic scribe, we know that beneath its crust of dry Latinity lies a hoary sublimity bred of vast ignorance. Somehow, despite all its indigenous strength, our literature has always suffered from a sort of inferiority-complex; it has forever sought to infuse into its veins something of the foreigner's enviable smoothness and "correctness", his richer grace. Too often we underestimate the original bloodstock which was the source of its sinewy robustness. The well-meaning Hild might wash and array her clodhopping Cædmon to her heart's content: she could not really change him.

Without trying to make too much of it, Cædmon's case-history may serve as an introduction to one of the main theses of this essay: that all the would-be different, would-be clever efforts of the scholars were, ultimately, fated to be misplaced. One of their consequences has been that as a nation we have come to wear our poetry with a difference; and that in the process, poetry has in some ways become a lesser thing. The intrinsic qualities of the English genius could not but remain essentially unchanged. They were communal rather than individualistic. Intuitive, not intellectual.

In the Old English period this foreign influence was not extensive enough to bring about any marked change, though, as we have already said, it is interesting to see it encroaching so early. Throughout the period, that is, so long as Anglo-Saxon remained a living language, vernacular speech continued to be the natural language of poetry; popular fôlk-lore supplied its raw material; the people's homely voice gave it its intonation and its true character. The clerk at times supplied the veneer, but beneath that veneer there beat the heart of the peasant.

And, though the work of the scholar's pen has outlasted the singing voice, we should never forget which of the two was, in fact, the more significant influence.

Ælfred, so the school story goes, was himself a minstrel, and who, indeed, was not in those days? Ealdhelm, to lure unwilling pagans into his church, stood at the porch singing "ballads and folk-songs" to put them at their ease. In Lancashire and along the Welsh Border Mercians and Cymry camped and sang together; and though the conjecture admits of little proof, it may have been from such intercourse that many of the earliest Arthurian romances were bred—Celtic magic mingling with Anglian realism. Northumbrians and Danes, their feuds resolved at last, settled down side by side, intermarried and swapped tales of derring-do; and so the Midlands and the North absorbed something of the Norseman's vision, his fierce venture and irresponsible nature. In the midst of so much rude, robustious clangour, can the scholar's contribution have amounted to anything more than a whisper? These leathern-lunged singers—brawny revellers—might stand in awe of a scribe, but they had little in common with him. Sermons they heard, chiefly Biblical stories which they assimilated and turned to their own still-pagan account, and they were fond of borrowing Latin tags from Church services; but for the most part they continued to live their lives unchanged. Monks and scribes were an unrepresentative minority, yet they were the only ones to commit anything to paper: consequently if we are to judge Old English literature solely by what remains of it in manuscript form, we are obviously fated to gain a highly distorted view of it. These archaic remnants are only a glass through which we may read strange matters—portents significant, nevertheless, for the whole subsequence of poetic expression in this country. Their worth is not merely intrinsic. We should, of course, read them for their own bald vigour, but more can be gained by what we read *into* them, learning by inference something of that greater, popular literature now dissipated

in air. That universal singing has long ago been stilled, all its alliterative ecstasies silenced, its emphatic rhythms forgotten (—or at least not consciously remembered). Folk-memory retained some part of it and it will appear later how, in a gradually diminishing way, it survived in the hearts of the peasantry, lingering on until the last years of the nineteenth century. To-day, whether we care to acknowledge it or not, it is still dormant in every one of us, transmitted through the blood of generations.

After the Norman Conquest this habit of communal authorship—poetry as a social attribute—tended to disappear, and in the centuries which followed it was increasingly overlain by the “matter of France” and by many another influence. The language changed; social and economic circumstances changed: the peasant remained the same. When others had forsaken it he took over the trusteeship of the Old English tradition.

How right he was in this conservatism we shall hope to show. On the face of it we are Englishmen, more or less intellectuals as the case may be, but at heart we are still Saxons, and deeper still we are countryfolk, peasants, earth-men. Maybe we have moved further from the heart of things, but somewhere in all of us that original muse remains. The whole purpose of this book is to elaborate this argument, to disentangle the foreign elements and lay bare the essential, enduring substratum of English literature; to point one moral—that the true virtue of poetry springs directly from the spirit of the people for whom it exists and ultimately from the soil. So long as poetry remained close to the affairs of homely life and country matters it remained true to itself. To the extent that its appeal touched everyone it could not fail to achieve greatness. But when it sought elsewhere, in higher places, it tended to lose that saving contact. Learning and intellect might make it more urbane and intricate, but in the long run under their guidance it tended to lose the common touch, becoming more and more isolated as time went on. Learning and intellect added cubits to the

poet's stature *as an individual*, but his personal advancement was bought at the expense of the universal sympathy which he had hitherto been in a position to command. Henceforth he must "fit audience find though few".

What then were the permanent characteristics of this native tradition? First, community of purpose, objectivity in authorship. Second, an ability to deal best with the elemental simplicities, an instinctive grasp of universals—Life, Death and those things worse than Death. The burden of the mystery, the magic sense of something "far more deeply interfused" is never far from the peasant's mind; and this accounts for the occasional miracle which he achieves with language, the bare word haunted by something beyond meaning. Next, a shaggy vigour of style, a complete readiness to go roughshod. (The typical English poet is not, by nature, *verborum artifex*. "He lacked art": that is a criticism which has been levelled at Shakespeare and, at one time or another, at all truly English poets. It is a national peculiarity which we cannot eradicate and of which we might as well be proud. If we lack art at least we also lack artificiality—or should, if we are to remain natural.) Also, a natural tendency to high-seriousness, a constant hankering after things half-apprehended or seen but dimly, a twilight sense, mystery from the North; darkness, profundity. Lastly, a brooding fatalism.

These, of course, are generalizations, and it would be foolish to pretend that they represent anything better than a series of half-truths even if applied to Anglo-Saxon poetry alone. Futile to claim that the English genius could ever have remained unchanged and undeveloped—yet, is it impossible to suggest that the qualities enumerated above are essential to its make-up?

Consider, for instance, the fatalist trait. For all his piety, the true countryman, whether in the eighth or the twentieth century, retains his faith in those primal forces and sympathies without which he knows he can do nothing. Was it ever put more forthrightly than by the Saxon?:

Wind is swiftest in air, thunder roars loudest
 Christ waxes in greatness, Wyrd is strongest.

The realization makes him at all times intensely serious: and it gives his every word the immense weightiness of a sturdy independence. Contrast the simple statement of such a poem as the "Ruin" (a description of some Roman encampment abandoned and falling to decay),

Wanly the walls stand blown on by winds
 Covered with rime-dust ramparts in ruin . . .

with, say, Spenser's "Ruines of Time" or Goldsmith's "Deserted Village". By their time poetry had, of course, developed in sundry directions—and something had been bred out of it in process.

There are other reasons for thinking that the peasant attitude had in it something that was essential to a national poetry, most of all his readiness for wonder. This, and a freely reflective attitude which he learned at his work in the fields, produces an immense dignity. It carries with it a sense of the sublime which to him seems inevitable, though others must strain after it to the point of affectation. While it may not be perfectly true to say that tragedy and comedy are always close at his elbow, the conditions of his life do ensure that he touches bottom in every emotion. He may not range the whole gamut of human experience, but what he feels he feels with passion, intensely. His is the bedrock position.

This sense of something deeply interfused (—impossible to write of without thinking of Wordsworth—) finds its expression in a certain grandeur of conception, at times a Homeric stature.

Compare Milton's

Leviathan, which God of all his works
 Created hugest that swim the ocean stream,
 Him haply slumbering on the Norway foam
 The pilot of some small night foundered skiff
 Dreaming some island, oft as seamen tell
 With fixed anchor in his scaly rind. . . .

with the eighth-century poet's account of the whale,

Fastitocalon!	floaters on sea-floods
Rough his shape	of hide stone-sharded
Mighty, such as moves	by the sea's marge
Girdled by dunes	begirt with greatest seaweeds,
So that mariners	in their minds imagine
An island in their	eyes appearing
Tie fast alongside	their tall-stemmed ships . . .

Are they not akin? The first cultured and mannered, the second ignorant and uncouth, yet in both the dimensions are identical; and was it chance which induced both authors to see in the whale a symbol of the Evil One? ¹

After two such quotations it may seem contradictory to describe the national genius as unimaginative, but so it is. Deriving, as it does, from peasant stock, its first attitude is one of complete matter-of-factness, an insistence on things as they are. The vastness of outlook which produces this almost epic quality of style is something quite distinct from conscious imagination. Because they were at all times so close to earth (and sea) and because their very existence was a ceaseless struggle against the elements, the first poets took their imagery straight from Nature. They felt no desire to qualify or elaborate it. It was stamped in them. Their eyes were in the furrow, not in the cloud. So rooted they were in the soil, so intent upon immediate objects, that they felt no need for any airy, unsubstantial pageant. First things first. They had not become so sophisticated nor so world-blasé as to wish to gild lilies, nor did they try to spin self-created webs of fantasy from their own entrails. The world was too much with them for that, but the world was enough and good enough. They took

¹ It is just possible, of course, that Milton knew the Old English "Physiologus" and that he remembered Fastitocalon when he wrote this passage. Attempts have been made to show that he was influenced by Saxon poetry, in particular by the Cædmonian "Genesis": but where parallelisms seem to occur they are surely best explained as due to "strong conception of the same traditional situation by two different minds". (Cf. C. W. Kennedy: *The Cædmon Poems*, Chap. XXXV.)

it as they found it—real. Theirs was always the direct appeal.

Naturally there *are* occasional flashes of strangest insight; no follower of the plough is ever without them. The hard grain of common sense, however, is always strong enough to prevent any drifting into mysticism. Cynewulf has been called a mystic and certainly of all the Anglo-Saxons he comes nearest to being an imaginative; but consider him in one of his unearthliest moods—the description of the land where the Phoenix lives:

Wondrous are the woods there the green wolds
Widespread under the skies. There neither snow nor rain
Nor frost's freezing nor the hot flare of fire
Nor squalling hail nor hoar-frost's fall
Nor weather overwarm nor the winter's shower
Do malice on man. . . .

Contrast this with Tennyson's island-valley of Avilion—

Where falls not hail or rain or any snow
Nor ever wind blows loudly but it lies
Deep meadowed, happy, fair with orchard lawns
And bowery hollows crowned with summer sea,

—and feel a difference. Remember the lament of the Seafarer at the inclemency of his existence, his preoccupation with the unrelenting bitterness of Nature: what else is Cynewulf's arcadianism but the reverse panel of the picture? His description is instinct with actuality. It is a straightforward statement of facts. By comparison, Tennyson's is a dream world, the unreal creation of the poet's mind. Granted, "Morte d'Arthur" is more studied, more artistic, more intellectualized, but who shall say that it is *really* better?

The question is not so outrageous, nor its answer so gratuitous, as may at first seem. More than a thousand years separate these two poets, and though a few lines may not be adequate as a test-case from which to argue anything of the

evolution of English poetry, it is worth while pausing to examine the differences between the two.

To express that difference in philosophical terms one might say that all poetry has its noumena as well as its phenomena—inner core and outer form—and that whereas Cynewulf's emphasis is upon the former, in Tennyson the position is reversed. In other words Cynewulf is really objective, Tennyson subjective. To decide which of the two is to be preferred may be a problem of higher criticism. Obviously no dogmatic decision can be made until we have decided where and how the balance should lie, though certain it is that no poetry can be enduring which does not possess something of both properties. Possibly Tennyson's advantages in formal setting forth *do* outweigh the raw material of Cynewulf's verses, though a thousand years hence the verdict may be reversed.

On one point we can be certain: the more self-conscious the poet became the more did he tend to lose self-reliance. And the more he allowed himself to be taken up with problems of personal style, the further did he remove himself from reality and from his fellow men. In its original expression poetry was by the people, for the people. Later it became gradually more and more isolated in its manifestations, and though sporadically it reached great heights in great men (in individuals, that is), it is to be doubted whether its function has not, on the whole, suffered a drastic restriction. It would be rash, no doubt, to claim that its last state is worse than its first, but no one will deny that twentieth-century poetry is largely confined to particular coteries.¹ It is no longer "joy in widest commonalty spread". We are so accustomed to its being appreciated by the few that we can scarcely conceive it being otherwise. The arc-lights have so long been focused on a few outstanding

¹ Thus we find Eliot confessing, "I myself should like an audience which could neither read nor write. The most useful poetry, socially, would be one which could cut across all the present stratifications of public taste—stratifications which are perhaps a sign of social disintegration." (*The Use of Poetry*.) What need we any further witness?

pedestals, each with its name, date and label, that we forget the basic platform is still the same. The root of poetry is in the common people, themselves rooted in earth. Surely this truth has remained unchanged and we are still a common or garden folk? Otherwise as literary entities we are futureless.

Returning to this question of evolution we might express the distinction between Cynewulf and Tennyson analogically (and very unfairly!) by comparing the worn dogtooth clustering round an Early English lancet arch with the more perfect slickness of Victorian mock-Gothic. The latter is far more finished, correct to a hair's breadth, tooled more precisely, yet it lacks what the other possesses—rightness, authenticity. In a word, it has lost the common touch.

Which carries us, as it is meant to, into the Middle English period.

CHAPTER II

VOX POPULI, VOX DEI

IF we are no longer able to understand how so immense a unit of work as the construction of a mediaeval cathedral came to be undertaken we at least know something of the conditions governing the Gothic craftsmen under whose hands it emerged. They worked together, these men, as a corporate body—architect, master-mason, sculptor, glazier, carpenter, lad fetching stones . . . Each had his necessary task, as mariners on board ship have, and so, being infused with life, the building *grew*, became a living thing, because it was the product of a living purpose. It was not the product of labourers mechanically executing the preconceived design of any single master-mind. Its whole secret lay in unity-in-diversity. The master-mind was there, of course—Lanfranc and Prior Conrad at Canterbury, St. Hugh and Grosstete at Lincoln, Alan of Walsingham at Ely—but his foremanship was more by way of being a remote control than a strict imposition of authority. The execution of a gargoyle, a vaulting boss or pillar capital left the stone-carver almost unlimited freedom for the expression of his own ideas. Adding his own piece to the rest of the pile, sure by faith that his task was worth while, he laboured in perfect good conscience, contentedly, and in the process he became an artist. Probably he had little or no conception of what the finished church would look like, any more than an ant has, toiling to raise its' hill, and yet the final result was far from being a conglomeration of ill-considered trifles. Each gargoyle, boss and capital served its purpose: use and beauty were indivisible.

It has been argued that the earliest cave-dwellers were artists. In the sense that healthy folk must turn to *things* in order that through them they may come to know themselves more

perfectly, they were. The virtue of the mediaeval builder's success is explained by this: the man had identified himself completely with his material. Since *labor* was *opus* it followed that the maker was artificer. The hand which held the tool was guided by an ethical attitude of mind. Crude, ignorant that mind might be, but in its humble, unquestioning way it had its appointed place in a social system which was in fact something more than a system; and even if the sum total of all his details had not added up to such a glorious conclusion, the stones he wrought, bearing the imprint of his personality, would have remained interesting.

But they did add up. The cathedral remains a work of art rather than a record of human endeavour. How did they do it? In the same way that an army of winter starlings twists and turns as one in the wind—by living together and sharing a single consciousness. As Massingham says, "the most perfect art is ultimately co-operative, rising out of the common understanding, no longer like a single tree or flower but like a landscape".¹ So it was throughout the mediaeval period.

To-day, viewing St. Paul's dome we think of Wren. It is a *tour de force*, the work of an acknowledged genius; and we are suitably impressed. At Wells or Lincoln we look with different eyes: there, too, the design is perfect, but the effect is far more intricate—we need to look longer, pry into every corner. The genius is more interfused: every coign and crocket is worth examining. We feel behind the general glory the unassuming spirit of mutual fellowship, the presence of a host of forgotten men. Lesser men, maybe, but how natural and homely!

All this is very apposite to the cause of poetry as we intend to argue it here. As with stones, so with words and music. A similar evolution in mind and habit as that which produced the tradition of English masonry and gave us in turn Saxon, Norman, Early English, Decorated, Perpendicular and Tudor architecture, can be traced in our minstrelsy. Too often,

¹ *People and Things*. P. 216.

dazzled by its brilliance and luxurious intricacy, we regard this architecture as being almost a freak product, the sole achievement of the Middle Ages. Granted, it may have been their supreme achievement, but the fact that it was the best does not prevent its being also typical. One of the main reasons for the stoneworkers' enduring success was that he was born to greatness,

the child of a long-continued tradition which was nevertheless living and progressive; he was unspoilt by a knowledge of other countries and traditions alien to his own (a knowledge we have found to our cost both unsettling to the mind and chaotic to inspiration.)¹

It is surely beyond argument that English Renaissance architecture is inferior to the native building which preceded it and that this branch of art has never since recovered from the break which it suffered in the sixteenth century. The argument holds in literature.

With all its barbarous faults, Feudalism had its advantages: at least it retained the hall-marks of communal living and co-operative working. Far from breaking or enslaving the ordinary man, it seems to have fostered in him a sense of security and stability, endowing him with two qualities which were lost to him in later centuries—confidence of purpose and earnestness. For the serf it was enough that, in the phrase of Aquinas, he “knew God and lived in communities”. Hand in hand with others he enjoyed that saving fellowship which incidentally—accidentally almost—produced art. His everyday life was pre-eminently social.

Now is Perkyn and his pilgrymes to the plowe faren.
To erie his halve-acre holpyn hym manie.
Dikeres and delveres digged up the balkes . . .
Other werkemen there were that wroughten ful yerne
Eche man in his manere made himself to done
And some to plesse Perkyn, piked up the wedes.

¹ F. H. Crossley: *English Church Craftsmanship*. P. 8.

Each man in his manner! What could be more natural or more desirable? Is it not this sense of happy inevitability which gives to all things mediaeval their charm?

"Piers Plowman" is, no doubt, the most obvious literary testament of the common man in the Middle Ages. Chaucer? But with Chaucer we never quite get away from the comfortable courtier, nor from the high-life world of his masters, Ovid, Jean de Meung, Petrarch and the rest. Langland, "Long Will" or whoever it was that wrote the "Vision" (significantly enough there is some evidence to suggest it may be the work of as many as four or five authors), was clearly a man of the people, plain, God-fearing, pedestrian. Not that he championed the lower classes, even though one of the purposes of his poem was to reveal the state of wretchedness in which they had their being, wretchedness which culminated in that first outburst of English socialism, the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. On the contrary, every section of society was castigated. (The true labourer can endure, even if he cannot condone, the tyranny and sharp practice of his masters, but indolence and improvidence are faults which cannot be excused in any man.) Thus those lazy losels who

songen atte nale

And holpen erie his half-acre with "how trollilli"

roused Langland to far greater fury than all the vices of the idle rich. He pleaded for humility of purpose and honesty in labour, never once looking beyond or hoping for anything better than the peasant's ordinary lot. In all ages this fatalistic resignation (call it, rather, acceptance), this refusal, inability almost, to desire anything intrinsically better than what he has already known, is characteristic of the peasant's outlook. We shall find it surviving five hundred years after this in such a one as poor John Clare.

Throughout the fourteenth century there was a marked revival of democratic feeling: not the paper-ballot democracy as we

know it, but the sturdy independence of men who knew they had some dignities and were prepared to claim them. Even under the rigorous Normans, no serf was entirely dispossessed: he had his blessed plot and his customary rights in the land.¹ The gradual relaxation of the Feudal System was accompanied by an emancipation of the human spirit; and however severely early puritanism may have denounced folk-drama, folk-dance and folk-song, it could never entirely suppress them. There was, indeed, no reason why it should have made any serious attempt to do so, for even the most dangerous of rebels claimed no political enfranchisement, only the retention of rights to which they had always been accustomed. The general feeling of the masses was a complete readiness to acquiesce in the state to which it had pleased God to call them. For all his grievances, Piers never doubted for one moment that

Bondmen and bastardes and beggers children
These belongeth to labour, and lordes children sholde serven
Both God and good men, as here degree asketh.

That such lowly people should aspire to high literature may seem unthinkable—why, they could neither read nor write!—yet we know that they were for ever singing, singing unrestrainedly at their daily toil. The Church was constantly reproving their lewd delight in

entryludes, or synginge
Or tabure bete, or other pypynges

and the fact that so many of the learned writers felt constrained to point out the error of their ways confirms the impression that serfdom was not, as most historians would have us believe, browbeaten, sullen, cowed, but rather carefree, exuberant even.

¹ Mr. H. V. Massingham's evidence is worth quoting:

"The term 'serf' is a very misleading one. The bottom class in the community had his one acre as bondman and his five acres as a cottar . . . since the village was an organic inheritance it may be said that the meanest bondman owned it. . . . The serf was a free-peasant in the toils: he became the commons of England." (*The English Countryman*. Pp. 7-9.)

You can beat the soul out of a man, almost, but not his love of rhythm. In spite of all the dire, Hell-threatening remonstrances of the clerics there were still many who went "Karolland alle that yere, hand in hand". At least it is pleasant to think so, and in view of the mass of folk-literature even now remaining who shall say us nay?

Like their British and Saxon predecessors these men had no thought of setting down on paper the "compositions" which emerged from their social intercourse. When words came they enjoyed them as and when occasion suggested—*in situ*, as it were. Inspiration, occurring only in a social situation, served only an immediate purpose: it had not yet reached the stage of being designed for any future reference. Popular taste seized on rhyme (brought hither, no doubt, by the Normans, though an incipient love of rhyme is noticeable in later Anglo-Saxon verse) while retaining its unfailing sense of alliterative values and free stressed rhythm. Another development of the post-Conquest era is its passion for narrative. Everyone was eager for tales; but they had to be told in verse and, more necessary still, they had to be in the language of the human voice. The whole point of their existence lay in the act of telling.

Assessing the powerful influences which metamorphosized our language and literature in the first two hundred years after the Battle of Hastings, historians make much of such figures as the troubadours, jocalatores, scolares vagantes—foreigners all. The scop is passed over. Yet, though he had been superseded, he did not die nor did the instincts of his audience. The common people were the matrix in which these new forces stirred. Popular taste might be modified by these forces (though it is just as true to say that it modified *them*), but it remained fundamentally the same. The world of Wessex absorbed the world of Normandy and of France. Mercia and Northumbria, we know, were slower, far more averse to digesting the new pabulum—they stubbornly preserved the native

folk-lore and traditions (with important results in after times); but everywhere it was the immemorial customs which moulded the new development. The pre-Conquest way of life had gone, but not the habit of singing together. Village folk might seek to copy the minstrel's song, making it their own in the process. What they heard in castle or courtyard they aped in their cottages: but it was the new *form* that they seized upon so eagerly: the substance, manner and the function of their verse remained the same as before.

To such people the thought of committing song to paper never occurred, for the simple reason that such an occurrence was not possible. It was, besides, unnecessary. The joy of poetry lay in the hearing and the creating: if a thing was worth preserving it would, automatically, be remembered in the voices of after men—that, if they thought about it at all, was their attitude. Why worry? There was none of the later writer's anxious lust for a private immortality. We have already noted the Roman's terror of being forgotten and the precautions he took to ensure his self-perpetuation, and in this connection it is worth noting that a kindred monumentation of literature is not found in this country until the Renaissance, when the Classical influence first intruded. Spenser's complaint that "joyous time will not be staid", Daniel's boasts, "Authentic shall my verse in time to come", were never shared by country folk, who invariably commended the spirit of their poetry into the hands of their fellows. And surely it is because Shakespeare is, at heart, at one with them in this fundamentally sane attitude that we find in him the same apparent carelessness. There is little evidence of his having attempted to get any of the plays into book form. As far as he was concerned his work had already been published in the mouths of players: if they saw fit to perpetuate it in any other form after he was gone, well and good; if not, it was no matter. The play was the thing. As a young and upstart sonneteer he may have made much of his claims to posterity, but that was merely because he was following the

convention of his time: you will not find a word of it in the plays. Had it not been for those faithful executors, Heminge and Condell, Shakespeare's legacy would probably have gone the way that most folk-poetry went. If this seems strange, remember that it is inevitable and right that the principle of natural selection should apply in the case of literature as it applies to every form of evolutionary process. Whether we like it or not, all our modern, sensitive precautions to preserve our writings by giving them durable, concrete form are over-ridden by it. To-day we may protest that it is only the blind improvidence of Fate which permits such an expense of spirit; and the vastness of our libraries only bears witness to the desperation of the vain resolve. Books are but Joanna Southcote boxes in which most of our poetry withers to dust. The peasant has always been more wise. He never blinks the facts. He knows that there is no armour against Fate. Hard experience has taught him that only the fittest *can* survive. Whether it will or not he leaves to circumstance.

Therefore we must insist on the importance of the uttered rather than the spoken word even at the risk of seeming to labour the point. The common man throughout the mediaeval period must have been extraordinarily sensitive to the qualities, musical or otherwise, of the human voice. Possibly he was far more perturbed by dialect differences than we are to-day. With what quaint superiority does John of Trevisa remark how "in menye the contray longage ys apeyred; and som useth strange wlauffyng, chyteryng, harryng, and garryng grisbittynge . . . al the longage of the Northumbries, and specialych at York, ys so scharp, slyttyng and frotyng and unschape that we Southeron men may that longage unnethe understoude"; and the worthy Robert Manning is at pains to make it clear that what he writes is done.

In simple speche as I couthe,
That is lightest in manners mouthe.

I mad noght for discours
Ne for no seggers or harpours
But for the luf of symple men
That strange Inglis can not ken. . . .

English had not yet shaken down into any readily recognizable shape. It was still in its most inchoate stage. The breakdown of Old English and the introduction of French idiom involved a bewildering diversity of dialect barriers throughout the country. As a consequence folk-literature tended to be confined to a variety of little local kingdoms. But the fact that there was no such thing as Standard English did not mean that there was no common speech. Within the range of each closely-knit community there was. To-day the various classes of a disparate society share only the same *jargon*: there is no common consciousness between them, however, therefore no common speech. Words which are intended one way by one man are now interpreted as holding a different meaning (or no meaning at all) by another. It was not always so. We have our Received Standard English, yes—a colourless, flaccid medium—but we have lost the means of immediate intercommunication. Fourteenth-century man had the better part of the bargain, we feel. He might, in the unlikely event of his travelling, find the language of different districts “difficult and foreign”; but among his own kith and kin he enjoyed a converse more vibrant and meaningful than we can know. And wherever he went he found the same love of right speaking.

That fine scholar, Kenneth Sisam, has criticized the style of “Piers Plowman” on the grounds that it is ingenuous to the point of crudity, redundant and diffuse;¹ and of course he is right—the peasant in his attempts to make himself articulate as often as not suffers from just these faults. Even so, the line he quotes to illustrate his remarks:

Mathew with mannes face mouthed thise wordis

¹ *Fourteenth Century Verse and Prose*. Introduction.

(in plain prose, "Matthew said"), is scarcely a happy choice. The mere phrase "mouthed thise wordis" provides a valuable insight into the customs of the time, surely. Minstrels, interlude players, jongleurs, itinerant entertainers, pedlars of "gestes", tellers of romantic tales,—all these were "sayers". They constituted a regular profession. An illiterate proletariat held them in high esteem. To impress their audience, who knows now how they mouthed? All the exaggerated formalities of their style of declamation are forgotten now, though their habits of gagging—on-the-spot improvisations—probably account for many of the endless, minute variations in existing manuscripts. The sober scribe, we know, was often offended by the garbled versions of poems as pronounced by the "sayers". Robert Manning, for instance, was a monastic scholar, a "good clerk" if ever there was one, one who was certainly not given to mixing in low-life matters; yet he held it a sin that

Non them says as thai tham wrought
And in ther saying it semes noght.
That may thou here in Sir Tristrem
Over gestes it has tha steem
Over all that is or was
If men it sayd as made Thomas.
But I here it no man say. . . .

Always the accent is on saying and hearing.

This being so, it is necessary, as we found when trying to evaluate Anglo-Saxon poetry, to look beyond the written word. The pen is mightier than the sword, or so they say: certain it is that the human voice is more powerful than either. If we were to judge it only by the actual *writers* (monks, scholars, courtiers), the Middle English period might seem unduly sombre and arid, even grim. Wyclif, Rolle, Gower, Lydgate, Orm—prosy moralizers, bitter satirists—on the whole a dull lot: but beneath all this there existed a popular literature, a substratum of live tradition which, though it has left few tangible traces, continued to shape the life of this nation, albeit unseen and

unproclaimed. It was a tradition quite apart from any Continental influence, refined and enriched by Norman trans-fusions, no doubt, but still roughly exuberant, with its old roughshod vigour. The voice of the people.

Only rarely does it come to the surface in any questionable shape. Usually it flourished most in the seclusion of its own rustic dialect kingdom and it became more prominent the farther it was removed from the graces and urbanities of the sophisticated world. Such near-masterpieces as "The Pearl" or "Sir Gawayne" are typical. In the middle of the fourteenth century, when southern England was busy absorbing the spirit of French lyric and romance, the wild west and backward north remained uncouth enough to cling to the old alliterative style of pre-Conquest poetry. When at last a foreign inspiration did manage to penetrate to these remote, uncivilized outposts it suffered more than a sea-change. It was altered beyond recognition.

Mist merged on the mor, malt on the mountez
Uch hille had a hatte, a myst-hakel huge.
Brokes byled and breke bi bonkes aboute
Schyre schaterande on schores, ther thay doun schowved. . . .

Garrying grisbittying indeed! Mouth that out with man's face if you like, and ask yourself (quite apart from the imagery), whether any but an English countryman could have achieved such hoddén-grey stuff as this. Its diction is as unlovely as a labourer's clogs in a cow-byre, and as clumsy, but has it not something, too, of their heavy honesty, their durability? The Londoner of 1350 would probably have regarded this sort of verse as hopelessly antediluvian, a quaint survival of a way of life long since outmoded. At best he would have looked upon it much as the eighteenth century looked upon Shakespeare, half-patronizingly, as showing a certain enviable virility yet barbarous, lacking correctness. Clearly the old habits of Saxon alliterative verse had managed to keep alive somehow, at least

in districts of the ancient kingdoms of Mercia and Northumbria where they had always been strongest. Distance prevented the more polished culture of France from reaching such parts quickly and when at last it did arrive it was slow in permeating through to the lowest levels.

The south was not so immune. There a learned influence had been admitted and a certain self-consciousness in poetry was already discernible—that anxiety to render the vernacular graceful and immaculate which was to become so much the baneful obsession of the humanists and the Augustans. Only the provinces continued to have no scruples in their use of language.

The point at issue is not so much to belittle the foreign influence (which was considerable) as to stress the power of the native tradition in assimilating it. The troubadours (and, for that matter, the Danelaw skalds) had the knack of narrative which a Saxon folk lacked, but which it immediately sought to copy and quickly rendered its own. It was not long before the new high-sounding metrical romances and saga tales—Sir Orfeo and the Lay of Havelok—became part and parcel of English folk-lore.

Men speken of Romaunces of pris
Of Horn Child and of Ipotys
Of Bevis and Sire Guy
Of Sire Libeux and Plein-damour . . .

not to mention those more familiar, homelier heroes of whom the rural gleemen sang. It is a fascinating problem of scholarship to disentangle all the many-mingling foreign elements of this early romance-literature, to trace its origins far back into time and space, to Schleswig and Iceland on the one hand, to France, Italy, Rome, Greece and points eastward on the other. "Sir Ipotys", for example, is traceable to Epictetus, the legend of Robert of Sicily to the Buddha. A pretty task for the professor, perhaps, a game for the connoisseur, but scarcely

profitable. For what was all this compared with the influence of an enormous popular taste?

Once again there is not much to go on in the way of written verse. Still, we know that the fierce love of epic heroic-poetry (of which the "Battle of Maldon" is the last remnant in Old English) was retained among the common folk and that they did not just accept the conquerors' legends but learned to invent new ones. They had heroes of their own—Athelstan, Waltheof, Hereward, Arthur and Robin Hood—figures who stood as popular symbols for just those needful attributes of which simple folk had been so long deprived but to which they never ceased to aspire—knightly achievement, consideration for common welfare and the common decencies of life, honour, freedom. . . .

But while it is true to claim that the inspiration which had produced "Beowulf" was transferred to the creation of the heroic ballad and chivalrous romance, it is fair to admit that during the interim it had lost something of its original burly stature. The reason is not far to seek. The wild, high-Homeric abandon of Old English poetry could only have reached maturity under conditions of tribal independence. That independence, we know, suffered a serious interruption after 1066 and all that. As Barbour, that unquenchable Scot, has it:

A noble hart may haiff nane ess
Na ellys nocht that may him pless
Gyff fredome fail.

Poetry being the "gift of joy", it is therefore necessary to examine the social and economic developments which had brought about this change in its nature.

In the first centuries after the Conquest the ordinary man's lot undoubtedly degenerated, at times, to the point of degradation. True, there had been misery, slavery, in the Saxon world, but generally speaking the individual had been able to call his soul his own. But the Normans systematized bondage,

enforced it ruthlessly with iron hand. It has been calculated that even so late as the opening of the fourteenth century more than 50 per cent. of the population of this country were still serfs. They had no legal rights whatever: such as they had earned had been evolved by custom and remained unwritten. They were not entirely deprived of their land, as we have already conceded, but the fact that they were without any means of redress meant that their position was always precarious; they were exposed to every possible abuse. It was this essential weakness which led ultimately to the dissolution of the English peasantry—a misfortune from the point of view of economic security and a disaster for the whole subsequence of our literature, the extent of which we have only recently learned to suspect.

The Saxons had always been a pre-eminently agricultural race, lovers of the soil. Under the Normans they were bound to it hand and foot by rigorous laws. Husbandmen turned drudges. In a word they were repressed. For a time a wintry silence brooded over the land. Traditional customs and rituals were retained, but only in clandestine and restricted ways: their singing had necessarily to be hushed. Being clandestine, it tended inevitably to lose its former wild assertiveness, its fierce and forthright daring. All the confident, fiery aspiration of the old heroic epos was damped down: and the mighty impulse which might, given greater opportunities, have gone to the formation of a truly national epic was transferred into less ambitious projects—to romances, ballads, folk-tales (and hence, by slow degrees, the novel), to *débats*, ritualist dialogues (and hence, surprisingly, the drama) or else to unobtrusive snatches of song (and hence the folk-song).

One of the most prominent characteristics of pre-Conquest verse had been its diffuseness, the ever-present tendency to spread itself. Amorphous in its origins, verse of this kind could scarcely have failed to develop eventually into some form of vast dimensions: it was an unlicked cub, promising

mighty growth. Instead, its growth suffered an arrest. The break in continuity was not quite fatal, nor was it without its obvious advantages in other directions, but there was an interval of attrition. When it was over it was already too late to reconstruct the epic form. The energy-potential of English poetry had suffered not only a check but a diversion, a division of purpose: from now on it flowed in a number of smaller, narrower channels. And, more than ever, the major part of its existence was conducted underground.

Ecclesiastical authority was ill-disposed to let the people sing. The baronage, provided it got its dues, was largely indifferent: but neither the one from its pulpits nor the other from the cold seclusion of its castles was in any real position to interfere. So, when the day's drudgeries were over, stolid churls and honest villeins took part in their cottage gatherings: John Stoutlook, Gerry Kissdevil, Walter Mustard, Alan Paternoster and Gilbert Uncouth—not forgetting their raw-cheeked spouses, Maud (*née* Malkynsmayden), Margaret Merry and Alice Watsdoughter. There they partook of their hard-earned bread and cheese and corny ale. Afterwards there was dancing, of course. They did their best to forget their cares and to hold high festival, clapping hands and shuffling clogs as they beat time to their own home-made music. As formerly at the mead-bench, so now in parlour or on green, each and all entered into the spirit of the fun, adding his contribution when his turn came and joining in with the rest at the refrains. What matter if the iterations were wellnigh endless or if they were only a jingle of meaningless syllables, provided that they helped to keep the party going? Hey ho! and nonny nonny!, lulli lullay and trolli lolli or hey ding-a-ding—these and a hundred like them were the nonsensical formulae which secured the success of their revels. They served, for want of better orchestration, to bind their songs together: the vo-de-o-dos and bub-bub-booings of mediaeval syncopation.

The connection between folk-song, folk-dance and folk-

poetry is a subtle one: the three so closely inter-related that it is difficult to say where one ends and another begins. While not pretending, with the Abbé Brémond, that "Poésie, musique, c'est même chose",¹ we believe that there *is* a connection, even though we cannot define it precisely. The subtlety of this interplay of movement, melody and syllable is nowhere more perfectly illustrated than in the evolution of the carol. According to Gaston Paris the mediaeval carole was originally a dance in which the performers followed one another (follow-my-leader fashion) in a round, accompanying themselves with song. With a little imagination it is possible to visualize what happened—the swaying bodies, the feet stamping out the tempo, the heartening pull of a great swinging hands-all-round.² Words did not come at once, not until the dancers had got the rhythm in their bones. When that happened the verse was shaped by the movements which had suggested it. Listen:

Adam lay ibowndyn
 Bowndyn in a bond
 Fowre thowsand winter
 Thowt he not to long.
 And all was for an appil
 An appil that he tok
 As clerkes fyndyn wretyn
 In here book.
 Ne hadde the appil taken ben
 The appil taken ben
 Ne never hadde Our Lady
 A bene Hevene quene
 Blyssid be the time
 That appil taken was
 Therfore we mawn syngyn
 Deo gracias!

What gusto went to the making of this! Is it possible *not* to feel the heavy insistence of the lilt of it? One has only to close one's eyes a moment to see them all there in the kitchen

¹ *La Poésie Pure.*

² Cf. *The Traditional Dance*; V. Alford and R. Gallop.

(a Breughel interior)—the peat-smoked walls, the sweaty faces, the wheezy pipes and thudding leathern tabor. . . .

Such a song has other components worthy of analysis: first, the instinctive identification of its singers with the old, long-suffering Adam (father of all earth-men); second, the complete sureness of its religious faith (their ultimate solace) which invests each line with a chaste and child-like dignity. A third point to be noted is the manner in which it builds up bit by bit, statement and counter-statement, each alternate line waiting to come in with its refrain. In its precise, economical use of words this particular carol happens to constitute a perfect unit, but it is clear that this kind of lyric, with its possibilities of interminable repetition, still tended to formlessness. The number of verses, in fact, was limited only by the number of present guests and by the length of the dance of which it was the by-product. Lastly, there is no mistaking the use of alliteration to mark the heavy stresses—evidence that the Saxon idiom persisted, albeit in a new guise.

But when all is said and done it is its unassuming simplicity, the infant eagerness to go for baubles—the apple, the book, the trifle of borrowed Latin introduced with such mawkish pride to round its ending—that makes this carol what it is. So lowly its movement, so quaint its grace, yet still touchingly human. A lovely thing.

From such beginnings came the native English lyric, slight of sense, glee-born, its meaning emanating from music and bodily movement. Even Shakespeare knew better than to try to improve upon it. "It was a lover and his lass", "Blow, blow, thou winter wind", "Who loves to lie with me"—all these derive from folk-song antecedents. Contrast them with the Sonnets or, better still, with the mannered cadence of "Epithalamion", "Lycidas", or Drummond's Madrigals. There the idiom is quite different. Camoens, it has been said,¹ was an Italian poet who happened to write in Portuguese; and

¹ W. P. Ker: *The Art of Poetry*.

without stretching the paradox unduly the same might well be said of many of our Elizabethan lyrists. The Renaissance was an event of world significance and we cannot deny the change in literature brought about by its tremendous impact. On the other hand, we should not shut our eyes to the fact that despite the neglect which it suffered after the break-up of the mediaeval world order, the native genius remained, fundamentally, the same. It was indigenous, of the soil, common. The Renaissance tried to make it uncommon. To the extent to which it succeeded in doing so we cannot but regard the developments of the later sixteenth century as unfortunate: for if it be true that "the germ of all music lies in folk-music",¹ then it must be equally true that the germ of all poetry lies in folk-poetry. So, indeed, it did throughout the first fifteen hundred years of our history: since when the communal muse and the language of "official" literature have gradually drifted apart.

The extent of the division may be measured by comparing the songs in such a play as "As you like it" with the studied arcadianism of the lyrics in "Comus"—"Blow, blow, thou winter wind", say, with "Sabrina fair". The one is spontaneous, immediate, artless—if you like, a ditty. The other is much more formal, scholarly-superior. Exquisite as Milton's is, it has already gone one step along the road to artificiality. Of the two we must, in the last analysis, prefer the former. The reason for this imperative?—because we are Englishmen. As such we cannot but feel (for it is not a matter upon which we can reason with ourselves) that the free and unsophisticated utterance is to be preferred to one that is conditioned by alien voices. This does not imply any disparagement of Spenser, Milton and their ilk, nor does it mean that we shall bate one jot of our appreciation of their (in our opinion, misguided) achievement. It does mean that we shall insist far more than hitherto on the rightness and necessity of upholding the native tradition, the original line of development. Shakespeare is

¹ *Oxford Companion to Music.*

better, Shakespeare is best, because he remained true to the customs of the country. His country. He never allowed himself to be divorced from the good earth and that "Merrie England" the existence of which bookmen have always striven to deny. In sooth, he was a good mediaevalist.

If there be any doubts about the truth of all this, we need only recall the atmosphere of some of the fifteenth-century ballads:

In somer, when the shawes be sheyne
And leves be large and long,
Hit is ful mery in feyre foreste
To here the foulys song.

To se the dere drawe to the dale
And leve the hilles hee
And shadow hem in the leves grene
Under the grenewood tree.

Hit befel on Whitsontide . . .

and think again of Shakespeare.

Incidentally, Professor Quiller-Couch says of these lines: "It comes straight to us out of Provence, the Roman Province. It was the Provençal Troubadour who, like the Prince in the fairy-tale, broke through the hedge of briers and kissed Beauty awake again."¹ We flatly deny it! The modern reader is tarred with the same brush with which our post-Renaissance poets have bedaubed themselves: he is for ever foraging abroad for explanations. Certainly folk-tradition did avail itself of external and superior influences, but to say that "*all* popular song is derived from poetry more or less learned in character",² is an outrageous misrepresentation of the facts. The scholar again! Which came first, chicken or egg? The example chosen by Professor Ker to support his theory, "Sumer is ycumen in", may be an adaptation of a Latin hymn and was

¹ *The Art of Writing*. P. 161.

² W. P. Ker: *English Mediaeval Literature*. Pp. 75-6.

probably the work of a monk. What of it? The fact that it was originally a six-part canon in no way disqualifies it from being a poem of the people, even if it was not, in the first place, a folk-poem. If commoners did not beget it at least they made it their own. It is only right to remember, too, that throughout the Middle Ages the standard of part-singing was uniformly high among the peasantry, particularly so in Wales and north of the Humber (where, as we have already seen, the old alliterative style was still strong and where the chanted balladry continued to flourish long after it had been forgotten elsewhere).

Wherever two or three were gathered together there was some sort of choral celebration. Even if the scop had been superseded there was always someone ready to give an improvised lead, and the rest followed, joining in with the easy refrains. In its beginnings, the ballad, even more clearly than the carole, is demonstrably born of the social gathering: through song and dance it evolved a verse structure and imperceptibly, without deliberate intent, it became the vehicle of narrative.

The ballad was by no means the only outlet of popular literature during the Middle Ages, but it was—in every sense of the word—the commonest. To be sure, the existence of many ballads cannot be accounted for by straightforward explanations: and there are still scholars who refuse to credit the theory of communal authorship. Such a work as “Chevy Chase”, with its heroic ring (reminiscent of “The Battle of Maldon”), and its tendency to run to excessive length, is best attributed to some professional minstrel. Its language of high chivalry was clearly intended for the banqueting dais rather than for the village hall—but what is it but a statelier version of the humbler genus?

The ballad always speaks out loud and bold. Is it not significant that the latter half of the fourteenth and the whole of the fifteenth century, the period when it was in its most flourishing and creative stage, was a time of some social betterment

for the ordinary man? Serfdom was dying out. A new, increasing yeoman class was beginning to assert itself. As the feudal pressure relaxed, the commoners dared at last to raise their heads again, if only a little. Some even ventured to utter something of their long-pent discontent. Froissart reports their murmurings: "We are men formed in Christ's likeness, and we are kept like beasts."¹ Gower complains that

labourers of olden times were not wont to eat wheaten bread; their bread was either corn or beans, and their drink was of the spring. Then, cheese and milk were a feast to them. . . . Then was the world of such folk well ordered in its estate. Meseems that the lords of this land are sunk in sleep and lethargy, so that they take no heed of the madness of the common folk . . .

and it is to be feared that this same aristocratic contempt for the masses is shared by Chaucer too. His Ploughman, one feels, is only included as a concession. The least of all the Canterbury pilgrims, he receives bare meed of praise, chiefly because he is well behaved and knows how to keep his proper place:

He wolde threshe and thereto dyke and delve
For Cristes sake for every poore wight
Withouten hyre if it lay in his might.
His tythes payed he ful faire and wel
Both of his propre swink and his catel.

A shining example, evidently, of that deference and unquestioning subservience which was expected of country folk. And ploughmen, remember, were very far from being the lowest of the low. Considerably more than half of mediaeval society was excluded from Chaucer's book, beneath his notice, dregs of humanity. It would be futile to think less of Chaucer merely because he shared the opinions of the prosperous, but we know what that opinion was:

¹ *Chroniques*: ed. Luce. P. 337.

O stormy peple, unsad and ever untrewel!
 Ay undiscreet and chaunging as a vayne
 Delytyng ever in rumbel that is newe.

But Chaucer misjudged: it was not so much the people which had changed, as the spirit of an age grown restive. "Rumbel" there was, the mutterings of those whom history had so long striven to render inarticulate. Being ignorant, they naturally appeared susceptible to every veering influence. Were they not prone to follow any hot-head preacher, any leader who incited them with promises of new rights? The Black Death had decimated the land from end to end, but it had produced one consequence which indirectly proved to be to the peasant's advantage—an acute shortage of labour. Any man who suspects that he is indispensable needs little encouragement when it comes to demanding his rights. And with John Ball, Ket and other bold fellows fulminating at his elbow, shouting, "Things will never be well in England so long as goods be not in common and so long as there be villeins and gentlemen", it is not to be wondered at that he dared to express himself more freely. He had always been a social creature: now for the first he became socialistic in something like the modern, political sense.

When Adam delved and Eve span
 Who was then the gentleman?

In politics as in everything else he must needs resort to rhyme. The idle assertiveness of the Saxon harpist boasting his sword-arm finds a new voice in the terse and truculent hymns of the fearless rebel.

No doubt the majority *were* clayish, Caliban creatures: and it was perhaps inevitable that the learned writers of the time should take sides against all such, assuming a position of patrician scorn. But note that in so doing they had, even before the advent of the Renaissance, chosen a route which was to lead them ever farther from the universal sympathy. Of this more anon.

As usual, the rulers took fright the moment their authority seemed threatened. At the first hint of a stirring among the masses they had only one reaction: reaction. The screw was tightened. As usual this harsh precaution was unnecessary. For though the sombre patience of its bleak existence was now shot through with questioning gleams of large and liberal discontent, the peasantry as a whole was in no condition for organized revolt. They were, after all, a small-community folk, stay-at-homes. Most of them probably never saw more than a hundred faces, all told, in their lifetimes. This traditional conservatism was at once a source of weakness and of strength. By nature they always had been (and if they had been left unmolested would have remained) poetical rather than political.

Does all this seem impertinent? All this hodge-podge of history, economics, politics and sociology—certainly it is not the orthodox literary approach. Yet obviously there *is* a connection between poetry and these studies: and a knowledge of one cross-fertilizes knowledge of another. Criticism, if it is to learn the true trend of poetry in any age can only hope to do so by careful references to these various departments of science and by a synthesis of the relevances which are to be found in them.

In the case of the later fourteenth and the fifteenth century the conclusion is that a tremendous emancipation of the human spirit occurred, that this revivalism sought to express itself in an outburst of popular poetry, but that circumstances prevented its achieving anything like recognition.

In the old days the poet had been a man of the people. His first act on achieving individual status was to identify himself with the scholar and throw in his lot with the aristocracy. In other words, he became a writer first and foremost. To us the statement may appear a meaningless truism; but the distinction it contains is an important one, for it marks the first point of divergence between what we have previously termed

“official” literature (i.e. the written compositions of individuals) and “folk” literature (the product of the largely illiterate group). The argument is that, so far as popular verse was concerned, this divergence resulted in an increasing degree of specialization and a consequent narrowing of appeal. It was left to folk-poetry, the ballad in particular, to fulfil the broader, original function—that of expressing the emotional life of the plebs.

In the Midlands, and more so in Scotland and the North where the sentiments of an archaic tradition had been kept alive, there were even signs that a return to the exultant, unrestrained manner of the Saxon epos might have achieved something, given a fair chance. What else is the “Lay of Otterburn” but the old theme revived? In a lower key, perhaps, but essentially the same.

With this further difference, however; that by the time the popular ballad emerged as a definite form it had ceased to have any connection with the official literature. The responsibility for the latter had been taken over by poets who belonged exclusively to the upper strata of society and who now sought elsewhere for their inspiration. “Poetry” and “folk-poetry” had come to exist in separate worlds. The invention of printing widened the gap. The Renaissance made it an open breach.

There is a much-quoted passage in Sir Philip Sidney’s *Apologie for Poetrie* which illustrates the truth of this in quite remarkable fashion. In the midst of his scholarly apologia he suddenly breaks off, constrained to acknowledge the worth of a native, untutored balladry. It is, for the humanist, an awkward moment. His whole argument stalls. It is easy to see that Sir Philip has been caught in two minds. Too honest to deny the attraction which he feels for the traditional English verse, he is yet diffident, shamefaced almost, when it comes to making such an admission:

Certainly I must confess my own barbarousness, I never heard the olde song of Percy and Duglas, that I found not

my heart moved more than with a Trumpet: and yet is it sung but by some blinde Crouder, with no rougher voyce then rude stile: which being so evill apparrelled in the dust and cobwebbes of that uncivill age, what would it work trymmed in the gorgeous eloquence of Pindar?

The *volte-face* is most adroit: with a sleight of hand he has got rid of his difficulty, but not without his deception being observed. Obviously he feels the attraction of two opposing forces—the lowly pulse of English blood and the lure of haughty Greece and Rome; and it is obvious to which sway he has submitted.

Sidney's *Apologie* dates from about 1581, long after the period which we are considering, but it is worth recalling that he was far from being the first to make this fateful choice. Sixteenth-century humanism only confirmed a decision which had been made almost a hundred and fifty years previously.

Indeed, if we must fix a date to mark the crux of poetic evolution in this country, what better year than 1381, the year of the Peasants' Revolt? The full implications of the poet's betrayal were not at first apparent. By 1581 they are. Even Sidney's choice of title is oddly symptomatic. The mere fact that an explanation was deemed necessary indicates that the scholar-poet was not without misgivings: ever afterwards he felt his position to be slightly compromised; never again could he be entirely natural or unself-conscious. He had placed himself on a pedestal (—we might almost swap metaphors and write "on the shelf"). His attempt to divest himself of native "barbarousness" was more successful than he could have hoped: his new disguise was so apparently foreign that his fellows could scarcely recognize him. As a social entity he had contrived in a large measure to ostracize himself. He was forced on the defensive.

Not so the peasantry. In their conservative way they remained true to the habits of folk-authorship, absorbing only

such trifles of external influence as chanced to filter through to them, evolving an unseen and unacknowledged literature of their own. They honoured the voices of their rude forefathers. Diverted to the drama, this evolution grew to greatness. But in the realm of "pure" poetry the tradition was already on the wane. Disparagement was too much for it. The ballad was almost its last attempt to achieve recognition.

We cannot go beyond the fifteenth century, however, until we have taken the measure of mediaeval achievement in popular poetry. Quantitatively that achievement was more considerable than is usually suspected. But qualitatively?

In the first place the typical Middle English poem remained what the Old English poem had been, the utterance of a social group: its manner, consequently, is entirely impersonal. The ballad provides the type. Its attitude remains objective. Though frequently it touches the depths of pathos it has no use for sentiment for its own sake. It does not reach after feeling. Nor does it strive to be in any way subtle, to become metaphysical, to point any serious moral, though it has the plain man's moments of mystic wonder. It is intended purely and simply as plaisance. It tells a tale, is invariably dramatic. It is sustained in everything, not by any art or style applied painstakingly *from without* but by an inner worthwhileness. It treats of heroes for which every man can feel sympathy, speaking in an intimate language which every man can understand immediately. Its vocabulary may now seem elementary, but remember that words had not then been reduced to the matter-of-fact state in which we know them to-day; they were, besides, ennobled by choral ritual. When it came to expressing himself in rhyme the peasant felt no need to go out of his way to adopt anything like a specialized diction. One of the characteristics of all genuine ballad poetry is its ability, without ever striving for effect, to maintain a peculiar dignity; and it has, too, that miraculous economy of language which surprises us so often in Shakespeare (and so very occasionally elsewhere). It is the

gift of compressing into a single word or a bare phrase an infinity of significant emotion, as when Lear says, "Pray you undo this button", or "Never, never, never, never, never". It leaves us utterly at a loss. Like every other miracle it is, in fact, inexplicable in any ordinary terms. These words are alive! They jump all criticism. Their dynamic quality can only be accounted for by understanding something of the organic life out of which they were evolved. We can only say that somehow the humanity of its makers has been bred into the language: as in such verses as these—

In that orchard ther was an hall
 That was hangid with purpill and pall
 (Lully lullay, lully lullay
 The fawcon hath born my mak away.)
 And in that hall ther was a bed
 Hit was hangid with gold so red
 (Lully lullay, lully lullay
 The fawcon hath born my mak away.)
 And in that bed ther lythe a knight
 His wowndes bledying day and nyght.¹
 (Lully lullay, lully lullay
 The fawcon hath born my mak away.)
 By that bed's side ther kneleth a may
 And se ² wepeth both nyght and day
 (Lully lullay, lully lullay
 The fawcon hath born my mak away.)
 And by that bed's side ther stondith a ston
 "Corpus Cristi" wretyn theron.
 (Lully lullay, lully lullay
 The fawcon hath born my mak away.)

All the erudition in the world cannot explain *that*. It leaves us at the close wondering at ourselves like men betrayed.

By its insistence on vocal stress and alliterative inflexion, by its intimate connection with country life and landscape, by its maintenance of the strictly impersonal note, by remaining unaffectedly the voice of ordinary people, the folk-poem

¹ "What has Ingeld to do with Christ?" Cf. *infra*. P. 157.

² She.

preserved the true racial line of development, throughout the Middle English period, albeit in a changed form. Time had brought with it a richer experience, far greater refinement, a sensitiveness distilled from long suffering and intervals of quiet joy. For if feudalism and religion did much to tone down the stentorian voice of the rough Saxon, they taught it also new virtues—lovingkindness, tenderness, grace. The cult of the Virgin, in particular, produced a new attitude towards woman. How many of the ballads plead her cause—"Maid Marian", the "Nut Brown Maid", "Fair Margaret", "Yseult" or "Alysoun"—and how eloquently! Eh, vow, bonnie! These wenches, too, were warm and real, "burdes of blood and bone". Contrast, say, Barbara Allan with the Samelas and Phyllidas of the later Jacobean or the Chloes and Chlorindas, nymphs of the Augustans. In the pre-Conquest literary world there had been little or no place for woman, no time for sweetness or lullabies. By the thirteenth century, however, sheer drudgery, if nothing better, had wrought a change of heart even in churls. Every man had learned what Keats was later to find the poet's greatest lesson—that "Sorrow is wisdom": Fate had made them what the nineteenth-century poet set himself to become—"martyrs to the human heart".¹ In an existence which was so bleak and comfortless where else could solace be found save in a good wife? The minstrels of high chivalry might sing their ladies fair, the courtier his paramours, but the poor kind had motives nearer than these to exhort him, examples gross as earth.

Nor should we forget the feminine contribution. Her situation in mediaeval society, ever embowered, gave woman what her lord, as loaf-winner, could not often enjoy—leisure. She became more than a spinner of fine cloths: she wove with lips as well as hands, more than just tapestries. Women, as well as men, became music makers, dreamers of dreams, sitting by desolate hearths. Even the staid, severe Robert Mannyng is constrained to admit as much:

¹ Letter to J. H. Reynolds, 3rd May, 1818.

Ne dearer is none in Goddys herde
Than a chaste womman with lovely worde.¹

But the peasant has always appreciated this more than the cleric or the scholar. Ignorance and serfdom and the life of the soil have always impressed upon him that first and last of truths, that the best, the "only things that any mortal hath are those that every mortal shares". For him a good wife is the mirror of his life of toil: in her he sees exemplified the value of those very things which a hard Fate wrings from him willy-nilly—resignation, constancy, lowliness. His honouring her goes deeper, therefore, than mere chivalry:

Here may ye see that women be
In love meek kind and stable.
Let never man reprove them than
Or call them variable
But rather pray God that we may
To them be comfortable.

So that, if now at times, a lighter note is audible in the singing, a softer treble instead of the perpetual raucous bass, as formerly, who shall regret it? It remains the still, sad music of humanity. If its manner is less masculine, its range is far greater. If its stature has grown more womanly than warrior-like, lyrical instead of epical, it has, at any rate, continued to develop organically. Through all vicissitude it has remained intimate and true to common interests. It never allowed itself, on any pretext, to become dissociated from the popular cause.

It is for this reason that mediaeval folk-poetry remains so consistently *fresh*. Feudalism deprived the peasant of knowledge, leisure, ease: it gave him endurance, worth, innocence.

Unluckily, as we think, the main stream of literature tended to ignore these qualities. Many of the ballads were recognized as valuable, of course, and were salvaged before it was too late, taken down as Cædmon's verse had been, from the lips

¹ Compare the opinion, too, of a Greek peasant and primitive, Hesiod.

of those who continued to remember them. The remainder of folk-poetry was not so lucky. Until the nineteenth century no one deigned to transcribe it. In the meantime social and economic forces had brought about the complete disintegration of rural life. Not until it was too late was there anything like a realization of the full meaning of this irrevocable loss, though Goldsmith expressed some glimmer of it in a glib couplet:

A bold peasantry, their country's pride
When once destroyed, can never be supplied.

The ballad remains, then, as outstanding evidence of the extent to which folk-genius was active during the latter half of the mediaeval period. As socially-creative art it did not survive the Tudors (though in Scotland and the North where communal life was not so easily disrupted it continued to flourish). Under changing social conditions it lost its essential purity, deteriorated into the commercial doggerel and rhymed bawdry of the Elizabethan broadsides. Still, though nothing was added to the existing repertoire, villagers in many parts continued to recite the rhymed narratives of their ancestors long after the creative impulse had died. As late as the beginning of last century "Lord Randal", "Lord Bateman", and the "Maid freed from the Gallows" were as necessary to the rural child as the Three R's are to-day, and were sung in cottage homes throughout the land. Even at that late hour a story was still preferred when told in rhyme, even though both novel and drama had long since passed into prose: and, though twentieth-century philistinism has robbed him of the creative knack, it is still true that the modern villager has a finer appreciation of rhythm and rhyme than most. If anyone is likely to rediscover the secret relationship between tradition and the individual talent it is he.

Vale, then, to the main stream of our national poetry. After 1500 we shall find its course more subterranean than ever, divided and diverted into lessening channels, losing itself, surfacing only at intervals.

Before leaving it to pursue its course underground, however, it may be as well to summarize the changes which had been produced in it in the period between the Conquest and the Renaissance. It is a characteristic of organic evolution that it adapts itself swiftly to shifting circumstances while developing imperceptibly within itself. The peasant, whatever else he lacked, had the one gift needful for the establishment of poetry on a common basis—permanency. For him alone in a fluctuant world, life remains constant. We have already seen how folk-poetry had accommodated itself to meet post-Conquest conditions, how its voice had been softened, its rough edges smoothed. There was now more to it than the flint-flakes of December: for what was *their* harshness compared with the far more pitiless lash of the feudal whip? Useless, now, seeing what man had made of man, to bemoan the implacable enmity of Nature. But the ancient brooding was still there: the melancholy sense of Wyrð.

Wynter wakeneth al my care
 Nou thise leves waxeth bare;
 Oft I sigh and mourne sare
 When hit cometh in my thoht
 Of this worldes joie, how hit geth ~~al to nou~~
 Nou hit is and nou hit nys
 Al so hit ner nere, ywys.
 That moni mon seith, soth it is:
 "Al goth bote Godes wille,
 Alle we shule deye, thah us like ylle."

Only now this winter mood was no longer wholly unrelieved. Spring was never far behind. Between March and April, the glad season when summer was a-coming in—that was the time when English verse grew first verdant, ready for blossoming. The fieldling swain, scion of a breed of men who had always lived in intimate relation with the land and with their fellows, could at last appeal to elements which were not entirely devoid of feeling.

Blow northerne wynd
Send thou me my sweeting
Blow northerne windel . . . blow, blow, blow.

The bludgeonings of circumstance, the slow attrition of the centuries had only succeeded in endowing him with new powers of intuition—insight, resilience, refinement. He had come through, purged of dross.

The Middle Ages, then, were NOT dark. The more one comes to know of them the more one feels that they were the seed-time, springtime, the only pretty ring time of English song. Their flowers were only common daisies and furtive celandines, maybe, but they were all homely varieties, springing from English soil. Pity that so much of the high summer which followed should have been spent in the hot glass-house, nurturing so many forced and artificial blooms.

CHAPTER III

MIRACLE, MYSTERY AND SHAKESPEARE

MEDIAEVAL man was a moralist. Modern man is a materialist. If you question the rightness of such an antithesis, consider for a moment the different motives which at different times have prompted the masses to express their grievances. Two cameos then.

—The first, 1936, a Hunger-Strikers' March. Men from the "depressed areas", miners from Coxhoe and Spennymoor, seedy shipwrights from Jarrow, down-at-heels from the dead furnaces at Middlesbrough, they came trudging down the Great North Road *en route* for Whitehall and for Downing Street. They bore with them whitewashed placards, dumb slogans. To the rattle of collecting-boxes their leaders ranted at street-corners and in market-places, demanding the removal of the Means Test, jobs, bread. . . .

—The second, 1536, the Pilgrimage of Grace. This time it is an even greater army, 30,000 all told, a motley multitude of noblemen, gentry, yeomen, peasants from these very same counties, making the self-same journey. The redress which they sought?—the annulment of Lutheran heresy, the re-establishment of ecclesiastic liberties and customs at Durham, York and Ripon.

Look here upon this picture and on that.

As efforts to obtain satisfaction from an overriding authority these marches had only one thing in common—both failed. The coincidence of dates and the identity of the routes might suggest the usual remark about history's repeating itself; but ethically what a world of difference there was between the two ventures! King Henry, we read,¹ "issued sermons and exhortations: to which the pilgrims *replied with poems*"—

¹ J. S. Fletcher: *The Reformation in Northern England*. Pp. 92 et seq.

Great Goddess fame
 Doth Church proclaim
 Now to be lame
 And fast in bonds,
 Rob'd spoild and shorn
 From cattle and corn
 And clean forth borne
 Of cattle and lands,

—doggerel, agreed, but the incident's significance lies in the fact that poetry, minstrelsy, versifying (call it what you will) was second-nature to these men. In politics, religion and their daily life rhyming was their first resort, their chief means of expressing what was closest to their hearts.

These factors—intense spiritual conviction and a long-standing tradition of folk-poetry—are of primary importance in any consideration of the development of the English stage. The fact that Elizabethan drama blazed to its meridian in so short a time, a swift decade, is a phenomenon which every critic has struggled to explain; but none, or few, have stressed the secret, homelier developments which made it possible. Doubtless the influence of liturgical play-acting plus a sudden uprising of national feeling and Renaissance enthusiasm will partly account for it. Certainly if it had not been for the Church (afterwards its greatest enemy) there might have been no drama at all. And certainly if the humanists had not exhumed Seneca, festering in his shroud, we should never have had

a stately written tragedy
 Tragedia cothurnata fitting kings,

But when all is said and done, explanations of this sort explain nothing. Their attempts to track down the elusive secret only lead the inquirer further into a maze of superficialities. But there is one trail which, although it is by no means unexplored, has yet to be followed to its conclusion and which leads

us inevitably back to the original source, the earth. Chapter II endeavoured to show how the "energy-potential" of folk-poetry was prevented from finding its proper outlet in a national epic and how it subsequently tended to overflow into other forms. Eventually it found its main outlet in the popular drama: the ballad was not big enough to contain it.

Again, the theory is conjectural. Whether or not it be valid, it offers a line of inquiry which is worth following. Once again we invoke a cloud of unseen witnesses, forgotten countrymen to conjure forth from the mists of Time the green stage and the scenes thereon enacted. Once again we write on behalf of unpretentious rustics who only said their say and departed:

We are not the London actors
That act upon the stage
We are the country people
That dances without wage.¹

As an ethnological type, the Saxon was (and remains) insensitive to drama. His interests lay in other directions, epic rather than dramatic. The scop declaiming must have had some sense of situation, but generally speaking it is fair to say that histrionics were no part of the metabolism of the ordinary pre-Conquest man in this island. Apart from a few lines of dialogue there is nothing in the debris of Old English literature which faintly resembles the beginnings of a play.

On the other hand, there were certain folk ceremonies and pagan rituals ancient as the race itself; and these, though not in themselves dramatic, were full of dark significance, pregnant for the future. Even Religion, always a dominant influence in all matters mediaeval, was powerless to erase this primitive attitude from ancestral memory—it had to be allowed for and incorporated in the Church calendar. Thus the custom of Corn Blessing continued as St. Mark's Day observance; the Earth Charm incantations became Plough Monday prayers;

¹ Mummers' Play.

Loaf Bearing was maintained under the pseudonymity of Lammastide—the old rites continuing under new management. And what an infinite variety of so-called holy-days there were!—Folk-moot at harvest, the Feast of Fools at New Year (the villagers' saturnalia), Samhain (now masquerading as Halloween), the Beltain fires (now May Day revels), the curious chairing of the Boy Bishop at the Feast of Innocents, the Hock Tuesday Game which was in fact a mock-combat commemorating battles long ago (probably the ancient feud of Mercian and Dane). All this may seem to have little or no connection with the evolution of a national dramatic form, but it provided the germ and spirit of that form. In the same way the sportsman of to-day finds no obvious connection between the bloody field of Stamford Bridge, 1066, and the F.A. field of Stamford Bridge, 1946. Yet the fact remains that the Hock Tuesday Game (which began by commemorating the battle), ended as football, "wherein" as Sir Thomas Elyot gravely remarks, "is nothing but beastlie furie and exstreme violence".

It would be too much to claim that all these ceremonies tended to assume dramatic shape, though probably a fair proportion of them did and in ways of which we now know nothing. The drivellings of the mummers, the mumbo-jumbo mysticism of those shrivelled survivals, the St. George's Day plays, give us a bare inkling of what happened. They can only be understood by interpreting them back, like the weird Sword Dance, to the Life and Death ritual of heathen times. Even in the garbled versions in which they have been handed down they retain some of their former dread significance. Seeing them performed we still feel a twinge of uneasy implication, and even the pitiful buffooneries with which the performance is supported cannot raise in us more than the grimmest of smiles. We are not now much given to superstition but we have heard enough to raise a qualm of inner misgiving if not actually of Aristotelian "pity and fear". We can imagine what horrific effects it must originally have produced in the peasant

mind. Whatever else it lacked, folk-drama was assuredly not wanting in potency.

From the beginning, then, the drama-to-be was a serious business, emanating from the lowest levels of meaning. The undisciplined revels, puppet shows, processions, roadside entertainments of jongleurs and tumblers, the low-life *gestes*, *débats* and unsavoury tales of itinerant farceurs—all these crude lighter elements were in time added, snowball-wise, to the general conglomeration. Even though they were not primarily dramatic and were for some time not thoroughly assimilated, they provided the materials for the broad foundations of the English stage. Between them, they constituted the main ingredients of that rare ichor which, for want of a better, goes by the name of Elizabethanism. Without some knowledge and appreciation of their artless contributions we cannot hope to understand all the turbulent roisterings, the black horror and bright, bubbling humour, the ranting sublimities swivelling to rank coarseness, which were the precious life-blood, hot and thick, of Marlowe, Shakespeare and their kin.

While it is no part of our present intention to crack the wind of the metaphorical phrase by pretending that folk-festivals of this kind could ever, in themselves, have produced great drama, it is not too much to claim that they were the indispensable means by which that end was attained. The natural impulse of folk-genius was to express itself first in the heroic manner, later in the lyrical. Dramatic style was something which developed later. Not being an inherited characteristic of the countryman, it developed by degrees. How often do the young Shakespeare's instincts prompt him to epic utterance, to declamation or pure lyricism even though the words be out of keeping with the character and involve a complete pause in the action. It is the same with Marlowe:

Zenocrate, lovelier than the love of Jove
Brighter than is the silver Rhodope,
Fairer than whitest snow on Scythian hills . . .

and with Peele:

The primrose and the purple hyacinth
The dainty violet and the wholesome minth,
The double daisy and the cowslip, queen
Of summer flowers, do overpeer the green
And round about the valleys as ye pass
Ye may ne see for peeping flowers the grass.

Tradition will out. These men were poets first, dramatists afterwards. And when their fire had spent itself we find Dryden, in his "Heroic" plays, trying to blow fresh heat into the dead ashes of Elizabethanism by resorting to the same methods, succeeding only in a vain, but impressive, *reductio ad absurdum* of sound and fury. It is the old hankering for high-astounding terms, the instinct which had prompted "Beowulf" and which never quite succeeded in finding satisfactory outlets for its uncontrollable intent. Many a long, delaying speech (—Mercutio's praises of Queen Mab, for instance), and the "unnecessary" wordiness of Elizabethan playwrights generally is due to just this cause. Call it a fault if you are a foreigner: blame, if you will, the audience which expected this sort of thing; but remember that there is no supply without demand. Mouthing with man's face, habits of holding forth, love of fine speaking had long been a necessary feature of the communal life.

Return to the peasant. We do not know precisely when or how folk-lore and folk-song went to town. There are records of itinerant bands of village interlude players, "rude rustics and artificers", in Edward IV's reign. Naturally the idea of earning an honest penny by turning actor occurred first to those who had no other means of livelihood, particularly to that increasing section of the peasantry which found itself dispossessed and driven from the land. Long before this, however, the Church had frowned on profane "entyrludes", as a previous quotation has already reminded us. Just what went to the composition of the light-hearted, droll "interlude" we shall probably never know: like the ballad it was impersonal

in its origins, essentially oral and for that reason rarely or never preserved. Like the ballad and the ever-popular *débat* with its tit-for-tat "dialogue", it was the sort of show which needed little or no preparation, even by bookless folk who were slow of study. In its final form it was very largely a domestic affair,¹ a minor floor-show produced, among other entertainments, in the great Tudor houses. At its slickest it was, perhaps, comparable with the "double act" in modern cabaret. It is not until the sixteenth century that we find any evidence in black and white: indeed, if we judged only by printed works we might even imagine that the interlude was the personal invention of such an author as John Heywood. But Heywood was not without his predecessors any more than were the later writers of the literary ballad. The habit of play-making, as distinct from that of mere play-going, was deeply ingrained in the national character.

If it had not been so there would be no accounting for the so-called "Miracle" plays. Both the Coventry and Wakefield cycles bear the obvious imprint of an individual hand, the first severely didactic, the other with its unmistakable penchant for broad humour; but though the style may be the veneer of the one the substance derives from the many. Whoever "wrote" these plays only worked up scenes, speeches, plots that had already been prescribed for him by hoary custom. He stood, as Shakespeare later stood, on the shoulders of those who had gone before. Inch by inch English drama had, even at that time, been building up through the centuries: order evolving out of chaos. As yet it had achieved no towering eminence, indeed, but its foundations were both broad and deep and they rested ultimately on bedrock.

With regard to the popular religious drama, fortunately, the evidence is more than circumstantial. As early as 1300 it had become so much a feature of the nation's life as to call forth

¹ Cf. E. K. Chambers: *The Mediaeval Stage*, II, 183.

the royal edict against it, and we have Robert Mannyng's authority that

Hyt ys forbode hym yn the decre
 Miracles for to make or se
 For miracles gyf you begynne
 Hyt ys a gaderynt, a sight of sinne.¹

Many of the recorded fines "for playing in the churchyard",² one of the commonest of thirteenth to fourteenth century offences, apparently, are in all probability to be interpreted in this light. Not all the villagers' games were "ad pilam", "tabure bete" or leap-frog frolics over the headstones—their natural reverence must have been too great for that. Why then did they so haunt the churchyard? Because, being peasants, their every instinct impelled them to express themselves in the known ways: they had to body forth their simple faith in such a way as to give it visual, objective reality. They understood deeds better than ideas. The most stilted mime meant more to them than the account as read to them from the pulpit. They were actualists,—and so actors.³ What stage more fitting, then, than the parish graveyard, what better backcloth than the church itself? They had taken part in the solemn Easter processions, watching the priest at the high altar as he veiled the crucifix on Good Friday, marvelling at mysterious tropes and the symbolic rites of the Holy Rood borne in the chancel or the *Noli me tangere* scene enacted under the crossing

¹ "Handlyng Synn".

² G. G. Coulton: *The Mediaeval Village*, passim.

³ Sir E. K. Chambers writes: "The cycles required in many cases a larger number of actors than the ecclesiastical bodies . . . could supply. It was necessary to press the laity into the service." (*Mediaeval Stage*, II, 87.) With due deference to Sir Edmund's immense scholarship I suggest that such a statement reveals a mistaken understanding of mediaeval peasant psychology. Elsewhere he makes reference to the difficulties which the parish priest must have had in getting illiterate villagers to learn their parts. Clearly he confuses speaking with reciting, play-making with play-writing; and in so doing sets the cart but not the horse. The peasant did not have to go to school, nor to the parson, before turning player: nor was the scholar the only man who could "stepp in among the players, and never studege for the matter, make a part of his owne". (Roper: *Life and Death of Sir Thomas More*.)

—and in their own imitative and superstitious ways they wished to emulate them. Usually they were debarred from using the church interior and later the very precincts came to be forbidden ground, but despite every stricture and penalty the performances persisted. Quite unwittingly the Church had set in motion impulses which it was powerless to arrest.

Feudalism had imposed one mighty lesson on the serf—patient acceptance; yet the very nature of his lot was such that he must needs for ever aspire. His greatest delight was to *pretend*, to transpose his gross and meagre existence and give it some ideal form. What else was this but the essence of acting? The child is born to play. The peasant is a born actor simply because his outlook is so childlike. Consequently, as a fourteenth-century writer argues with stoutest common sense it was not only natural but right that such creatures should thus seek to express themselves,

by play and gamen, as by miraclis pleyinge and other maner myrthis. Also, summe recreatioun men moten han, and bettere it is (or less yvele) that thei han theyre recreacoun by pleyinge of miraclis than by pleyinge of other japis. Also sithen it is leveful to han the myraclis of God peynted, why is (it) not as wel leveful to han the miraclis of God pleyed? ¹

The Church, however, could not see the force of such an argument. If it did, it refused to admit it.

Incidentally scholarship has never really explained what happened to the true miracle plays; plays which took as their subject saintly legends and incidents not necessarily recorded in the Bible. Such a one was the "Miracle of St. Catherine" which Matthew Paris records as having been performed at Dunstable in the twelfth century. That they existed quite apart from the liturgical "mysteries" which in England (though not elsewhere) took to themselves the name of "miracles", is certain, though scarcely a trace of them survives other than a

¹ A. W. Pollard: *English Miracle Plays*, XXIII.

few titles in manuscript. Once again we are left groping at shadows. Possibly the St. George plays, in which the central theme is always a miraculous resuscitation, represent some sort of a survival: if so it would account for the disappearance of this earlier form. Being secular, if not actually pagan, in motive these plays would naturally tend to be regarded as irreverent and so ignored by those who could write (And is not "clerk" a "cleric"?). As with folk-poetry, so here. The true "miracle" was deemed unworthy. It never managed to get by the official censorship. Being oral, its whole purpose was satisfied in the performance: which done, not even a dried husk of words was left to remind posterity that it had ever existed.

One thing these rude mechanicals possessed, however, which was not forgotten—the sense of company, men working together. Right from the start they had that gift of close kinship and team-spirit without which no theatre is possible. Had it not been for Kempe, Burbage, Pope, Heminge and all the other stalwarts of the Lord Chamberlain's Men (not forgetting the earlier Ned Alleyn), that active social group in which he traded and had his being, even Shakespeare could never have developed in the ways he did. He would have remained an immense poet—the early "Venus and Adonis" is sufficient proof of that—but not necessarily an immense dramatist. He was lucky in finding the right social environment for his amazing genius. His *milieu* made him. It taught him among other things that impersonal, self-effacing quality which has always been the mark of the true playwright, and which was the stamp with which Everyman was impressed in mediaeval times. Probably in no other modern profession are the ties of ancient comradeship retained so faithfully as in the theatrical "company".

Feudalism, the force that bound down the commoners, only served to bind them together. This homogeneity, this group-feeling, transferred to the towns, became the dynamic which energized the prosperous tradesmen-guilds and honourable

companies of craftsmen. They quickly took over the nascent folk-drama and made it their own. Thus, though the subject and, in some degree, the spirit of the plays was religious, it is fair to say that both were socialized and made secular from the beginning; or rather, it would be still nearer the truth to say that mediaeval man was never conscious of any division between secularism and religion as we are to-day. Christ or Ingeld, miracle or magic, Host or sacrificial fetish, faith or superstition—it was all one for him.

In its essential manifestations, then, the drama became the voice of the people, not of the Church. The York records show that though parts could not be found for everyone to play, everyone had his job of work—carpenter, scene-painter, dress-maker, down to the youngest bairn who could carry a taper. As with the erection of the cathedral so it was with the preparations for the *Ludi Corporis Cristi*; there was no one who did not feel himself directly involved in one way or another. The city's proclamation for the performances of 1415 expressly commands, "menn of craftes and alle othir menn yat findes torches, yat yai come furth in array and in ye manere as it has been used and customed before yis time, noght haveyng wapen. . . ." ¹ Note the insistence that everyone, actors and audience alike, should dress up for the occasion, everyone enter fully into the spirit of the time. Torches, more torches . . . maskings, disguisings, colourful devisings, pageantry that excited heart and eye. Note too the words "as it has been used and customed before yis time", the grave acknowledgment of a usage which even in that day was time-hallowed; and remember those forgotten generations of simple players out of whom all this civic pomp and circumstance had been born. For citizens and burghers the Whitsun miracle-cycle might be *the* social event of the year, but town-dwellers were as yet a minority: we must never forget, even though we can no longer record, those humbler improvised performances on village green and highway which, till Shake-

¹ L. Toulmin Smith: *The York Mystery Plays*, XXXIV.

speare's boyhood and beyond, remained so much an annual feature of the English countryside. The city plays took time—and money—to produce; and when, as at York, there were as many as forty-eight of them, the problem of organization was no mean task. For the first time we find the question of finance intruding:

Imprimis to God	ij.s.	
Itm. to Cayphas	iii.s.	iiij.d.
Itm. to Heronde	iii.s.	iiij.d. ¹

—while the important, if less likeable, part of Pilate was still more expensive, costing the Pageant Master no less than four shillings (enough to purchase twenty-four gallons of best ale). For his due the Devil received eighteenpence, a moderate reward considering his tremendous popularity with the multitude; and there were, in addition, crowds of supers and walkers-on, each of whom expected his appropriate fee. Still, there was as yet nothing like a capitalist control although, as we shall shortly have reason to point out, the national economy had already begun to drift in that direction. As in its trade, so in its dealings as a theatrical company, each guild was self-contained: every craftsman paid his annual fourpence ("pageant silver"), which went to swell the common fund.

In this connection the phrase "noght haveyng wapen" is worth pondering. Mediaeval trade was not hag-ridden with the spirit of competition, but this did not mean that there was no place in it for rivalry, nor that the plays were performed in perfect harmony. Far from it. Each gild strove to outvie the others, to steal the thunder by putting on the most attractive show: in the championing of which tempers were apt to run high. Cudgel cracked head. Discipline had to be maintained!

Of the plays themselves what can we say? Though they had now become the possession of an urban community their outlook remained agrarian. The Worshipful Company of

¹ L. Toulmin Smith: *op. cit.*

Gaunters doffed their leathern aprons and put on smocks again: they came in pushing their wooden ploughs, uttering such unconscious home-truths as:

A tiller I am and so I will be
As my daddy has taught it me.
I will fulfil his lore.

For the nonce the Wakefield Painters and Glaziers turned shepherds again—rather grudgingly it seems, for they seize the opportunity to insert a sharp protest against the recent change-over from arable to sheep-farming and all its consequent evils,

No wonder, as it stands, if we be poor
For the tilth of our lands lies fallow as the floor,
We are so lamed
So taxed and shamed,
We are made hand-tamed
With these gentlery-men

How many an evicted hind must have enjoyed the daring politics of that satiric thrust! And these shepherds knew their audience. The winter wild they trod that Christmas Eve was, as they were at pains to point out, no unfamiliar foreign field, but their own neighbouring Horbury Moor.

In the next street, at the Nativity scene, the drifting crowd could hear a folk-song after their own heart.

Down from heaven, from heaven so high,
Of angels there came a great company
With mirth and joy and great solemnity.
They sang "Terli terlow"
So merrily the shepherds their pipes can blow,

and who can doubt that they joined in at that happy refrain? Then, to be sure, there was old granddad Noah, patriarchal in his high-appointed station, in the toils as usual with his wife Dame Gyb, the shrew: such home-truth, scullery back-chat as only countryfolk could thoroughly appreciate. The great Ark was itself spectacle enough, one of the set-pieces. This

play always provided the greatest of fun. Thick and fast it came, raillery, fisticuffs and rough knockabout: for it had become a recognized thing that Noah should always play the sour humorist. Even in his conversations with the Almighty he maintained just that balance between stiff-necked independence and half-servile, half-grudging obeisance which characterized the true peasant. In him the gawping cow-hands and hoers of turnips could see themselves personified, yet exalted. Their age-long fate and squalid calling seemed summarized in the old man's lament:

Sex hundreth yeris and od have I, without distance
In erth, as any sod, liffyd with grete grievance
Allway:
And now I wax old
Seke, sory and cold
As muk upon mold
I widder away. . . .

Telling words! Standing there on the cobbles, their faces upturned, their clogs ankle-deep in ooze or ordure, the yokels took it all in and gratefully applauded. They were not the ones to take it, or themselves, too seriously, however; besides, there was too much excitement waiting for them round the corner—the excruciating scene of Abraham and Isaac in Coney Street (compared with which their personal privations were as trifles), Herod raging on the Pavement, and the ultimate drama which eclipsed all else, Golgotha at the Minster Gates. They pressed on from street to street, all their emotions pitched and jolted as on a switchback at a fair.

To us with our lily-livered twentieth-century mentalities the Crucifixion scenes in these old plays too often seem irreverent, brutal to the point of degradation, but that is merely because we are farther from actuality than these men were. Pig-stickers and dung-carriers; they stood foursquare with the broad acres. They liked their meat raw. Such details as the bare Gospels did not provide their own hungry inventiveness supplied.

Thus the four Torturers labouring to erect the Cross were nothing if not realists. How essentially practical are all the details of their grim trade, how ghastly the ruthlessness of the final remark:

FIRST TORTURER. Up with the timber.
 SECOND TORTURER. Ah!, it holds!
 For Him that all this worlde wields,—
 Put from thee, with thy hand.
 THIRD TORTURER. Hold!, even amongst us all.
 FOURTH TORTURER. Yea!, and let it into the mortice fall
 For then will it best stand.
 FIRST TORTURER. Go we to it and be we strong
 And raise, be it never so long,
 Since that it is fast bound.
 SECOND TORTURER. Up with the timber fast on ende.
 THIRD TORTURER. Ah, fellows, fair fall now your hende!
 FOURTH TORTURER. *So Sir, gape against the sun!*

Loving-care in reverse, this, with a vengeance! You can almost see them dusting their horny, calloused hands, hear their grunts of breathless satisfaction at a job well done.

Switch now to Macbeth, Act III, Sc. 3:

FIRST MURDERER. His horses go about.
 THIRD MURDERER. Almost a mile, but he does usually,
 —So all men do, from hence to th' palace
 gate
 Make it their walk.
 SECOND MURDERER. A light, a light!
 THIRD MURDERER. 'Tis he.
 FIRST MURDERER. Stand to't.

(Enter BANQUO and FLEANCE with a torch.)

BANQUO. It will rain to-night . . .
 FIRST MURDERER. Let it come down!

Here again there is a staccato nervousness of dialogue, culminating in sheer savagery. There is that same thrifty use of words, terseness, the chance phrase that drops like a blow. We

have remarked on this quality in our scrutiny of mediaeval folk-poetry; and it is clear enough whence Shakespeare had it.

Indeed the more one seeks to distil the spirit of this antediluvian drama the more do comparisons and analogies between it and the work of our greatest Englishman suggest themselves. There is in both the same readiness and ability to take a well-worn theme and clothe a skeleton plan with vivid details of flesh and blood. There is the same open-air spaciousness which allows the dramatist to bring all earth and Heaven and Hell within the narrow compass of his stage: the same knack of taking the audience by its throat and forcing it into an intense illusion which bare boards could not suggest (nor later scenery supply). Compare the sudden onset of the Deluge in the Wakefield Play of Noah:

Behold to the heven the cateractes all
That are open full even, grete and small
And the planettes seven left has there stall.
Thise thoners and levyn downe gar fall
Full stout
Both halles and bowers
Castels and towers . . .

with the storm scenes in "Lear". In no other theatre is there a freedom of quite such dimensions as these, the naked elements taking active part. Both are kindred, too, in having the same sprawling grandeur of conception. In all the multiplicity of its various scenes there was, to one who saw it whole, a certain rough cohesion in the mediaeval cycle. Its very variety made it a cosmos in itself. It provided a conspectus of human emotion. It ranged the whole field of natural and supernatural experience, Mary's mildness, Herod's fury (akin to that of the modern all-in wrestler running amok among the crowd—all part of the game), Princes, Potentates, clowns, Apostles, Devils. . . . No character great or small was left unrepresented. The Shakespearean play possesses a similar infinite variety. It, too, reflects the mediaeval ordering of society. It, too, is a

mélange. . . . Tragedy, Comedy, History, Pastoral, Pastoral-comical, Historical-pastoral, Tragical-historical, Tragical-comical-historical, scene indivisible or poem unlimited. Merry and tragical! As Theseus says, "How shall we find the concord of this discord?" How else, indeed, save by knowing its parentage, the seeds long nurtured in the womb of Time?

In the same way that the solemnity of the Manger scene in the miracle plays was not complete without the irrelevant buffoonery of Mak the sheep-stealer, or the stark trial-scene without the lightsome cross-talk between Pilate and his Beadle, so Elizabethan drama must needs have its sub-plot of comic relief. The creation of Shakespeare's fools and gravediggers was ordained for him long years before he was born. (And is not the Porter in "Macbeth" none other but the gatekeeper of Hades, a figure remembered from some version or other of "The Harrowing of Hell"?) Where Kyd or Jonson sought to bind themselves to the rules of France and Italy, Shakespeare was content to follow that English divinity that shaped his ends, rough-hewing them as he willed. His countrymen, not Aristotle, were his guides. His easy contempt, bred of familiarity, for Time and Space, makes him multitudinous, bewildering—at times, if you like, prolix; but it gives him breadth. Such plays as "Cymbeline" or "Antony and Cleopatra", with their undeniable untidiness—loose ends left dangling, loose-limbed construction and general air of carelessness in presentation—are closely akin with the total conception of the miracle cycle.

That in his youth Shakespeare witnessed more than one performance of these earlier "religious" dramas we need not doubt: Warwickshire was still full of them.¹ Whether they had any direct influence upon him before he went to London is beside the point. They were in his bones. Was he not born in the very heart of old England? He might deride Herod's

¹ As late as 1579, the citizens of York were still trying to refurbish their plays "if that my Lord Archebissshop doo well like thereon". (L. Toulmin Smith, XVI.)

ranting or make mock of the crude efforts of bully Bottom and such palpable-gross players—and rightly, for he had risen far above all that; but from the beginning they had been a part of him. In him was secreted the quintessence of a national tradition long stored in the deep-delved earth; and the secret of his peculiar greatness lay in his complete willingness to allow his intuitions to unfold themselves freely, unhindered by the dictates of the schools. Almost alone among Elizabethan writers, he refused to submit to a foreign yoke. True, he absorbed much of the Renaissance excitement, most of its mannerisms, and without its stimulus his literary instincts could never have been so fully evoked; but Shakespeare's was a humanism of far tougher, warmer fibre than any known to the scholars.

More remains to be said of the mediaeval drama, however. Simplicity, stark sincerity, an unsophisticated insight which shuts its eyes at nothing, together with a religious conviction which plumbs the depths of pity and fear—these are some of the outstanding characteristics of the miracle plays. They are well named. Under that platform of planks, behind those walls of lath lay all the powers of Good and Evil. The players might speak as plainly as they pleased, their words were ever haunted by a sense of the infinite, by the ultimate awes and terrors of human destiny. And the *deus ex machina*, Jehovah, with his false beard and gilded face, was to his audience, the real God, the personal Father. Judged from a psychological or theatrical point of view the dialogue may seem heavy going, but in its unaffected, explicit way it is always impressive. Its motives are invariably poetic motives. The appealing pathos of the hanging Christ:

I pray you people that pass me by
And lead your life as lykandly
Raise up your heart on high;
Behold if ever ye saw body
Buffet and beaten thus bloody
Or dight thus dolefully.

In this world was never no wight
That suffered half so sair,
My main, my mood, my might
Is none but sorrow to sight
And comfort—none but care,

—achieves its effect by being so exquisitely lyrical. Yet when He concludes:

But Father that sittest on throne
Forgive thou them this guilt
I pray to Thee this boon
—They know not what they doon

the First Torturer chips in with a brutal, "Yes, what we do full well we know", such a riposte as no Dorothy Sayers would dare to think of, let alone utter.

That was the secret of the miracle: it dared. The fact that mediaeval man had been so long earthbound did not mean that the edge of his spirit had been blunted: rather that point had been added to it. The freedom which he could not claim in his work he enjoyed in his play. Some, at least, of the pent forces (the emotional and spiritual energy so long frustrated under feudalism) found their release in this greatly-daring drama.

Mediaeval man was a moralist. Apart from Biblical plays and the low-life "miraclis and entyrludes" which vanished without trace there remains one other type of early play which deserves a passing mention, the Morality. That it was of popular origin, as were the others, is improbable. It is an off-shoot rather than a continuance of any main branch of the native tradition; the work of monks rather than of uneducated folk, didactic, prosy rather than spontaneous and poetic. Still, if the main stem grew up to Shakespeare, the morality from its stonier outcrop reached forward no less surely to Bunyan. That it was well and generally received is certain, therefore it must have supplied some genuine contemporary need. Throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries mere Biblical narrative had been

sufficient to satisfy simple souls, but towards the close of the fifteenth and more especially in the sixteenth century men were more troubled with heart-searchings. The old order had not been greatly troubled with problems of personal salvation: but now dogma tended to crumble and gave place to polemics. It was the age of Luther and Huss, of Wyclif and Richard Rolle. A little learning is a dangerous thing; and even the translations of Tindale and Coverdale, the labours of Caxton, well-meaning as they were, served to add fuel to these smouldering fires. Sectarianism was creeping in.

Such the breeding ground of the Morality.

Though it was thus far removed from the life of underlings the Morality made common cause with the people's drama to the extent that it treated of Man as a common species. In one way or another *Humanum Genus* was always the main character in its *dramatis personae*. Dealing only in abstractions and ideas where the folk-drama traded in terms of men and their emotions, it was doomed, as art, to a dusty death: but it urged on all the same lesson:

Spylt is man speciously whanne he to synne assent.

It employed, to an even more marked degree than the cycle-plays, the archaic heavily-alliterative prosody for which plain Englishmen had always retained a more than sneaking affection. It is certainly no mere coincidence that nearly all the surviving moralities can be traced to a single district, the East Midlands, always a stronghold of Anglianism.¹ And, while the Morality is interesting as showing the emergence of the nation's puritanical streak, its influence in so far as English poetry is concerned is not primarily valuable on that account. Between them, *Miracle* and *Morality*, by keeping alive the stressed rhythms of the Saxon idiom, did a great deal to preserve us from the mechanical measures in which the early humanist writers sought to parcel out their verse. Had it not been for them the new blank verse

¹ Was not Bunyan a Bedfordshire man?

might never have become anything better than what it was originally—decasyllabic metre, a five-foot line of iambics. The blank verse of "Gorboduc" had weight (or should we call it heaviness?) but little else: in scope it was as constricted as the heroic-couplet. What pedantry could not achieve for it, the Old English accent gave—resilience, versatility.

In these and other devious ways, then, popular poetry turned from the heroic manner to the dramatic. Unable to contain itself in such minor vessels as the song and ballad, the fountainhead of native inspiration, accumulating from the lowest levels, found its final outlet in the flood-tide of Elizabethanism.

Whether it would have done so in the normal course of events is an idle speculation. The course of events in sixteenth-century England was very far from being normal. The assertion of human rights, first audible in the murmurings of the fourteenth, swelled to impassioned utterance in the sixteenth century; but by that time other voices had begun to mingle in the general chorus—humanism, sectarianism, nationalism, individualism. Already signs of discord and division were appearing. Social cohesion, which had been a main factor in determining the cultural tradition, no longer obtained. The old order, with its established ways and faiths, was giving place to a new restlessness and doubtful discontent. In the religious sphere, implicit reliance on the authority of the mother Church was being abandoned in favour of a self-sought, personal orthodoxy. In the economic sphere, the profit-motive was beginning to gain the upper hand. Society, instead of being homogeneous, now tended to become atomistic.

Now a tradition can only be transmitted by a *people*. Its influence is pervading, always unconscious, maintained by habit: it springs from a way of living, emanating from the blood rather than from the brain. An aura rather than a theory. As its nature is the reverse of intellectual it can neither be demonstrated nor perpetuated by any critical argument: nor can it be maintained by artifice once the conditions of its existence

have been changed. Divide the people and you lose the tradition.

We seek, not to isolate this indefinable influence, but to point out its existence, a leaven working unseen in the corpus of mediaeval society. All through the mediaeval era a common people had been dedicated to the land and though the circumstances of that dedication were never highly motivated, they were at all times sane and hard-living. Conditions were the reverse of ideal but they had at least the virtue of being organic. Generation after generation of men and women had lived in intimate relationship with the good earth and with their fellows, handing on from mouth to mouth a mature and living heritage of song and speech.

Shakespeare, we think, came just in time to reap the full benefit of that heritage. In a very real sense his achievement represents the apotheosis of the popular cause in literature—the culmination of the patient centuries. As a medium for poetry which “cut across all the stratifications of public taste” Shakespearean drama quickly proved itself to be superlative. From the Saxon mead-bench to the London stage was not, after all, such an impossible step: the continuity of spoken verse helped more than somewhat—there was always intimacy between actor and audience. More important still, the practice of common speech had developed the auditory imagination of the masses—what Eliot calls “the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten”.¹ The transition from heroic to dramatic was undertaken, as we have previously suggested, as a result of certain historical determinants rather than as a straightforward development of pre-Conquest tendencies; but the change-over was accomplished without any serious break. The forces of tradition were modified: diverted into an alternative channel, with the result that when the Elizabethan actor mounted the

¹ Essay on Matthew Arnold.

stage his speech was authentic because the whole weight of history lay behind his every word. But, since the drama was itself a kind of magnificent substitute for a national epos that might have been, no further alternative was possible. When the drama failed folk-poetry must needs become a lost cause.

Why, then, did it fail?

Given the requisite conditions, it might well have gone on maturing long after the sixteenth century, but the rapid disintegration of community life was a corrosive influence which it was impotent to resist. The decline is not to be explained merely by the increasing emphasis on town as opposed to country life—the miracle plays are proof enough that the transference from peasant to artisan authorship could be achieved without real loss. The decline was due, in the first place, to a number of political and economic changes which, on the face of it, may appear to have no very obvious bearing on the well-being of peasant cultures, and to which no reference is made in the conventional histories of literature.

First and foremost of these unlucky changes was a new cynicism in the agricultural policy of the Tudors. The decay of the manorial system, the enclosure of common lands, the formation of enormous pastoral farms to satisfy the exorbitant demands of woollen manufacture (England's staple industry throughout the sixteenth century)—all this was symptomatic of a State attitude towards the land which was not merely different, but morally inferior to that which had preceded it. For the first time there appeared the beginnings of a land market, in which the earth was thought of as a commodity for commercial speculation. Usufruct gave way to usury. Under the old order the peasantry—society as a whole, in fact—had lived in organic relation with the soil: but, as we have already indicated, this order depended entirely on unwritten custom for its continuance. Against the onset of new values and unscrupulous motives it was quite defenceless.

In itself, the ruthless exploitation of sheep-farming created

major social evils—eviction of tenants, competitive rentals, unemployment (a phenomenon hitherto unknown). Useless for Sir Thomas More to protest that: “Noblemen and gentlemen, yea and certayn Abbottes . . . leave no ground for tillage, thei inclose al into pastures: thei throw doune houses: thei plucke downe townes, and leave nothing standynge but only the church to be made a shepehouse . . .”¹—the process was enforced from above, as often as not by royal decree. Professional vagabondage and able-bodied beggary increased by leaps and bounds as a result. The first Poor Laws (a new feature in English legislation) were half-measures which were quite incapable of stopping the social rot. There was nothing new about poverty, of course: what was novel about this latest pauperization of the masses was the consciousness that it was man-made. Hence bitterness and unrest. Eldorado riches from the New World—Drake’s *Golden Hind* and other argosies—these exotic windfalls only served to aggravate the general grievance. Marx was right when he declared that: “the modern history of capital begins in the sixteenth century”.² It made men cynical. Even while their spirits rode the confident crest of Renaissance enthusiasm, while their eyes were still dazzled by the glitter of unprecedented riches, they felt an uneasy scepticism in their hearts. “T” was never merry world with us since purses and bags were invented, for now men set lime-twigs to catch wealth: and gold, which riseth like a sun out of the East Indies, to shine upon everyone, is like a cony taken napping in a purse net,” says Dekker’s *Andalocia*,³ and the same opinion must have been at the back of many a man’s mind.

The old simplicities were gone. The old morality was being undermined. The peasantry, like any primitive tribe exposed to sudden infection, was wide open to the virus of the new materialism and suffered accordingly. Instead of being a single, common folk it was split up into a number of lost

¹ More: *Utopia*.

² *Das Kapital*.

³ “Old Fortunatus”: Act I, Sc. II.

and wandering tribes. "Divide and rule"—that was the policy at the top: the result of which was that an integral society was sacrificed for one which became ever more self-seeking and sectional. With the growth of a minority of *nouveaux riches* came the opening shots of class-warfare.

Here and there, no doubt, the conditions of certain of the more enterprising representatives of the peasantry actually improved, but this was cold comfort when we consider what happened to the vast majority. They were faced with slow enforced extinction, not immediately, of course, but the unnatural pressure to which they were now subjected was never relaxed at any later time. The establishment of a solid, prosperous middle-class proved to be a slow and tedious business: and it was, at best, a poor recompense for the loss which English society had sustained.

Folk-tradition, in poetry as in architecture, had no means of countering these and other insidious influences. Being essentially conservative it was not immediately affected by, or even conscious of the aggression of the strictly personal motive and an acquisitive standard of values. Sustained by its own long-gathered momentum, it continued hale until 1580 or thereabouts, after which the symptoms were more manifest and brought a progressive sickening. As with every disease there was a certain time-lag between infection and the death. The germs had a delayed-action effect.

In other words, the Elizabethan drama, while it enjoyed the constitutional health of the mediaeval era, was at the same time nursing within itself the seeds of a fatal contagion. The wheel continued to spin for a time after the engine which supplied the driving power had been broken and scattered in pieces.

Shakespeare came just in time. His genius, rooted as it was in mediaevalism, remained inviolate. Maybe something of the unsavouriness of the time befevers his "Troilus and Cressida" or "Timon", but his robust sanity was strong enough to shake

off such passing fits. Jonson was not so immune. Already in him we note the earlier impersonality becoming personal: the old, all-embracing vision has suffered constriction, become, instead, a narrowly focused, critical scrutiny of contemporary society. By the time "Volpone" and "The Devil is an Ass" were written, drama had stepped down into a position which was really not so far in advance of that of the Moralities—with this difference: that whereas formerly the theme had been the universal one of Everyman, it had now become the more particular theme of what Man had made of Man. Meercraft points the seventeenth-century moral:

Sir, money's a whore, a bawd, a drudge
Fit to run out on errands: let her go . . .

Instead of good Sir Toby, Sir Andrew or rascally Sir John we are now confronted with Sir Moth Interest, Sir Walter Whorehound. Instead of Imogen, Lady Pecunia. Instead of warm flesh and blood, sour-cold satire. Instead of humour, humours. In a few brief years the complex carefree world of "Much Ado" or "A Midsummer Night's Dream" becomes in Middleton nothing more than a world of cormorants, caterpillars, dupes and courtesans, a harsh comedy of intrigue. Massinger has point, but he is too parching for the modern palate: his virtues all seem second-hand. In his hand Marlowe's mighty line which Shakespeare wielded as a sovereign sceptre has become little better than a dried stick. Admittedly he uses it to good effect, but the impression remains that the general atrophy has begun to extend even to prosody. So it is with the others. Already Heywood is wry-mouthed. Shirley drools. The tragedians are worse: either they melt into melodrama or (as Tourneur) turn merely nasty. All these men, despite their preoccupation with devilries, can, on occasion, write like angels; but the best of them begin to lack conviction. Their revels now are ended. The glorious light which made Shakespeare's day so golden has failed and with its fading the world seems

suddenly cold, ashen, menacing. Some of the early Stuart plays are passable, but they are all one step removed from reality. Even while he wrote, the early seventeenth-century playwright's audience was being broken up, the ground beginning to shift beneath his feet. "The blossoms of Beaumont and Fletcher's imagination draw no sustenance from the soil but are cut and slightly withered flowers which are stuck into sand," says Eliot. A fine example of intuitive criticism, doubtless intended metaphorically in its original context,¹ —but in one sense his words may be taken almost literally.

All things considered, we cannot regret the official closure of the theatres by the Puritans in 1642, abrupt as it was. Some *coup de grâce* was necessary. Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.

The drama's function had changed. As the gap between itself and the people widened, it lost its original sense of reality and universality. Worst of all, it lost intimacy. It became increasingly the property of cliques and though, like the rest of literature, it turned polite and thus became "official" it ceased to be authentic because it had severed its connection with the commonalty. Congreve, Wycherley, Etherege are clever, Sheridan smart, Goldsmith neat, but by their time even the "Comedy of Manners" had ceased to hold a serious mirror. Drama had become nothing better than a vehicle for airing the social problems of a coterie. It had slipped clutch. Never again did it regain the old grip on itself, for the good reason that those in control were themselves out of touch, dilettantes. Playwriting had become individualized, intellectualized —denatured and consequently prosaic. Whatever the results of sophistication and social reshuffle were in other directions, the upshot, certainly, was not poetry. As a necessary by-product of the national morale poetry had ceased to function. There was no longer any medium through which the people as a whole could become articulate: in the end the man-in-the-

¹ Essay on Jonson.

street grew so far estranged as to view poetry with actual suspicion and distaste.

Long after the Restoration attempts were made to keep alive verse-tragedy ("Sophonisba, Sophonisba, O!"), but they achieved at best no more than a pathetic appearance of animacy: all the vitals had been removed. Oddly enough, popular versions of once-famous dramas continued to be a feature of the green stage long after the London theatres had given them up as unrepresentable. "Dr. Forster" (scarcely recognizable as Marlowe's) was regularly performed in the open air at Shropshire "wakes" until well into the nineteenth century!¹ though by that time, folk-drama had ceased to function as a creative force.

Recent efforts at resuscitation seem equally doomed to failure. The theatre stands isolated: a house divided against itself. Such a praiseworthy venture as the Village Drama League, for instance, finds itself confronted with all manner of disabilities, not least of which is the modern rustic's inability to distinguish between *making* a play and *writing* one. The arts of spontaneous speaking and playing, of communal creation have to be relearned. Various restrictions—finance, censorship, the mechanics of the twentieth-century stage and the ever-present feeling that what is said must needs conform to certain "educational" standards—conspire to make the villager feel impotent. Cares of production are such that nothing is produced. The day of natural and social expression is done, it seems. We are too late.

Not so the master. 1564. The birth was propitious. Shakespeare did not live to see the earth cut away beneath his feet. He remained rooted in the ancient ways of Wessex and the Mercian world; no accident that caused him to retire into that Warwickshire countryside whence came his strength. Methinks he played as he had seen them do in Whitsun pastorals. . . .

¹ *Shropshire Archaeological Transactions*, VII, 383.

Is all this too fanciful?—or does there not emerge from all this gallimaufry some glimmer of truth? This much at least is certain, that the drama came from the people. So long as it stayed within their keeping it remained primarily poetic; and to ignore their essential contribution merely because it was unlearned is to mistake the form for the reality:

They that in play can do the thing they would
Having an instinct throned in reason's place—
And every perfect action hath the grace
Of indolence or thoughtless hardihood—
These are the best.¹

Whoever he was, the first peasant player must have agreed with Bottom: "This green plot shall be our stage, this hawthorn-brake our tiring-house." Remember, also, that if the first stage was the good earth, the second, just as surely, was some farmer's cart.

¹ Bridges: *Testament of Beauty*.

CHAPTER IV

"FORST TO FAYNE"

I

A CERTAIN Elizabethan Minister of State was invariably at pains to discover the drift of public opinion before embarking on any new policy, to which end, we read, "he had all manner of books and ballads brought to him, of what kind soever, and took great notice how they took with the people; upon which he would, and certainly might, very well judge of their present dispositions and the proper way of applying them according to his own purpose".¹ Such a method, he argued, was infallible.

The poet's was less shrewd. Without feeling himself seriously concerned by the division which had begun to appear between himself and society he now proceeded to widen it by throwing in his lot with alien orthodoxies. As far as the people were concerned he became very much the Lost Leader: so blinded he was by that last infirmity of noble minds that he could not see that those who led him on, and whose instructions he was so eager to follow, must ultimately mislead him.

It may seem merely perverse to argue a catastrophe in the Renaissance of English literature, seeing how much that literature has owed to the inspirations of Greece and Rome. Not so. We admit that in the sister art of architecture the change-over was not for the best; that Paul's is fine but Wells' is finer. William the Englishman was the true type of our master-builders, not Vitruvius or Palladio. Neither, then, could Petrarch or Ronsard be properly our masters in song-making. In architecture the debit side of the account is manifest: why then regard it as impossible that something equally precious was lost in poetry?

¹ *Spectator*, 6 October, 1712.

Throughout the mediaeval period the tendency had been for poetry to evolve rather than for it to be manufactured. Unconsciously, "naturally as the leaves to a tree";¹ it emanated as much from the activities of the social group as from the cogitations of any individual craftsman. It was a public possession, common as air or water: its influence was all-pervasive. It was the dynamic means by which delight was attained; not static, not an end in itself. "The notion of poetry as an end of life starts . . . so far as English literature is concerned with the humanism of the sixteenth century."²

"Humanism." The fanatical conviction that every problem could be solved by erudition—the ingenuous belief that "reading maketh a full man"—literature equated with scholarship. To us, knowing its achievement, that title may now seem a mockery. We find it difficult to recapture anything of the early enthusiasms of Colet, Fisher, More, Erasmus and the rest of those who gloried in the name of humanist. Their confidence that Latin could be resuscitated as a cosmopolitan language, the means whereby international communication and enlightenment would be achieved, was, to say the least of it, premature, so pitifully unjustified. Yet their failure in this was only one of the less reprehensible aspects of their enthusiasms: the others—learning for learning's sake, intellect as an end in itself, excessive reverence for the Ancients and complete submission to authority—were more dangerous. The new emphasis on personal achievement completely upset the balance of the Old World. Instead of integration it substituted dualism; instead of lowly singlemindedness, a lofty division of purpose.

It is not so much the artificial insemination of our poetry that we regret as the fact that the result was in the nature of a hybrid growth. Thus, in religion all the ideals of a noble (but pagan) civilization were brought in to illustrate the simplicities of mediaeval Christianity. Even the Gospels must

¹ Keats: Letter to John Taylor, 27 February, 1818.

² E. K. Chambers: *A Sheaf of Studies*. P. 132.

needs be read side by side with the "Symposium" and the "Dialogues" or, better still, in the interpretations of those later lights of Neo-Platonism, Pico della Mirandola, Giordano Bruno, Ficino. Philosophical commentaries, far from supplementing faith, only served to supplant it. Ethics retracted into metaphysics. Idealism was preferred to realism.

Yet a selfish idealism. In much the same way that a despotic government was appropriating the land for its own purposes so the humanists sought to constitute in themselves an intellectual oligarchy. Though they professed to believe in a universal propagation of learning (—and are not Elyot, Colet, Ascham honourable names in the primitive history of English education?), they were far too closely concerned with their own bookwormish aspirations to care much about the fate of the masses. Like Montaigne in his château, they had retired into their watch-towers of learning and from positions of lofty isolation they were content to look down on the remote world of ordinary men.

So with poetry. Scholarship took over. Not only that, but it claimed for itself a kind of exclusive divine-right, thus misappropriating what had so far been common property. Enter that worst of villains, the literary theorist. And the common folk, being great respecters of authority, were quick to defer, all too readily impressed by his specious arguments: the gist of which was that poetry was none of their concern any more than pearls were of swine's. Henceforth the poet was to be a prince out of their stars. The traditional forms were held not good enough: their ignorance damned them. Even the vernacular was at first suspect—to be used diffidently—a rusty instrument which might somehow defile the hand that deigned to use it.

Not every humanist adopted this out-and-out position, of course. The general opinion was that the English language was well enough in its own inferior fashion and that, for want of anything better, it was best to honour its adoption: and the poets felt the need to be constantly tinkering, trying to improve

it. Common speech was vulgar speech, therefore inadequate. Had not the French poets, themselves blessed with a language that was altogether more civilized and polished than our own, been constrained to pick and choose their words? Taken for granted that they were so much our superiors, was it not incumbent upon the English poet to follow their example? Master Du Bellay had been most explicit on this point: "Notre langue ne doit point être déprisée, même de ceux auxquels elle est propre et naturelle et qui en rien ne sont moindres que les Grecs et les Romains." Most encouraging: yet even Du Bellay's stout defence of French usage had been very much a façade, only half concealing a lurking sense of inferiority: for while admitting that it was possible to write worthily in one's native tongue, had he not implied that hitherto that lofty aim had never been achieved? To remedy which his instructions had been perfectly clear:

Puis me laisse toutes ces vieilles poésies françaises aux jeux floraux de Toulouse et Puy de Rouen; comme rondeaux, ballades, virelais, chants royaux, chansons et autres telles epiceries, qui corrompent le gout de notre langue et ne servent sinon à porter temoignage de notre ignorance. . . . Jette-toi a ces plaisants epigrammes . . . a l'imitation d'un Martial . . . distille ces pitoyables élégies a l'exemple d'un Ovide, d'un Tibulle, d'un Properce . . .

Chante-moi ces odes inconnues encore de la Muse française. Donne-moi ces beaux sonnets non moins docte que plaisante invention italienne. . . . Fais renaitre au monde une admirable Iliade et laboureuse Eneide.¹

Translate that into English and you have the spirit of Spenser and his confederates. Instead of residing on the bare earth on which so far it had been left to lie, poetry was to be raised up to a platform, a rostrum on the Roman model. For the

¹ *La Défense et Illustration de la Langue française*, II, 4.

first time poetry became the appurtenance of a school, a school with a prescribed curriculum. An attempt was made to restrict it to a programme. And the prevailing assumption was that once the English Muse had been thus dignified, when it had achieved something like status, being refurbished on the foreign model, it would at last be fit to exhibit itself to the world. Poetry could *begin*.

Possibly this is an over-simplification of the true facts, but it represents a fair outline of the humanist's creed: and how many of us still believe it! "Through Spenser Elizabethan England first becomes fully vocal":¹ that, or something of the sort, remains the considered opinion of the majority of readers. To which, not pausing to challenge what may be implied by the phrase "fully vocal", we must retort, "So much the worse, then, for England!" The implication that the second half of the sixteenth century was our national dawn-song (not forgetting, presumably, the premonitory clarion call of darkling Dan Chaucer) is nothing short of disastrous. The Renaissance in English poetry represents not so much a glorious beginning—though it *was* glorious—as a severance with the past. Severance with tradition. Severance with the people. Severance with the Faith. The literary Rubicon (—or was it Helicon?) was crossed: bridges were burned: the poet found himself on the farther shore, cast up high and dry, marvelling at this brave new world in which he now found himself, but already wondering, half-regretfully, how or whether he could ever return. Too late. His "thirst for loveliness" had led him not to Nature but to pursue the "idea of a celestial Beauty": like the dog in the fable he had dropped the bone and gone for the shadow. What follows is the story of his attempt to make the best of both worlds.

Spenser's case is typical. As he is the first, so he is, from many points of view, the most significant poet of the modern period. In his verse is to be found exemplified the dilemma

¹ Edmund Wilson: *The Burning Oracle*.

in which all poets were sooner or later to find themselves. Almost from the start he was hailed on every hand as "the New Poet", and not without good reason. Analysis of his work more than repays a close investigation, for Spenser's novelty has a historical significance that is quite unique.

Scrutinize, then, "The Shepherd's Calendar", the publication of which caused such a stir in the literary world of 1578 and which did more than anything else he wrote to advance the new poet's name. Not until the appearance of the "Lyrical Ballads" was there to be any book of English poetry quite so obviously epoch-marking. Of its intrinsic beauties we make no remark: the purpose of our enquiry for the moment is strictly clinical—the poet's situation, not Spenser's personal achievement.

Before we can read a line of these poems our eyes cannot fail to be distracted by the framework of pedantry with which they are surrounded. What elaborate pains have been taken to waylay the reader and win his deference by assuring him of the extent of the author's learning! Comparisons are odious, but the intention of Edward Kirke's prefaces and glosses is too obvious: the "Calendar" has been annotated with as much reverence as if it had been some newly-edited classical text. Before we get a chance of dipping into "March" we are first informed—with what excessive solicitude—"This Æglogue seemeth somewhat to resemble the same of Theocritus wherein . . . etc"; and with what high disdain are all other contemporary poets dismissed as a "rakehelly rout of ragged rimers". Only one, Gascoigne, receives anything like honourable mention and that scant, damningly faint: "a witty gentleman and the very chief of our late rimers, who, and if some parts of learning wanted not (albeit is well known he altogether wanted not learning), no doubt would have attained to the excellency of those famous poets"—that is, the Italians and the French. Contempt for most things English and traditional is expressed with reckless dogma: tellers of fairy-tales are no better than

"knavish shavelings" and (strange as it seems) the authors of the Arthurian legends are roundly denounced as "loud liars".

Spenser did not write these notes, but they had his sanction. Whether or not he thought them indispensable to an understanding of his poem, our guess is that he rather enjoyed the reflected glories which their presence seemed to suggest. It was a pose, a harmless deception rather than false-pretences, of course, but what a kick he must have got out of it! Yet knowing his personal fascination for Romance and for Faerie, and comparing the actual poems with the adjacent commentaries, we cannot help feeling a little nonplussed. So much of these simple pastorals seems still to be in the traditional manner: despite the great play made of Petrarch, Virgil, Homer and all the other names, the poet seems harking back as much as anything to Merrie England, "wel of English undefyled". The whole structure of the "Calendar" shows a curious conflict of styles—an interior that is almost pure Early English and an exterior tricked out with all the Renaissance gilt and stucco that it can be made to carry.

Clearly Spenser was privately conscious of this discrepancy: and hence his eagerness to accept the protection offered him by the pedants. The way Kirke and Harvey stand over him!—truculent bodyguard!: it reminds one of the jealous care which attends a tender champion at a prize-fight. Evidently the new poet felt the need of seconds and managers to support him in his venture into a jostling world; and what warders more capable than these? Harvey's intellectual ears, certainly, were of the cauliflower variety. Into their hands, then, Spenser committed, not his spirit, perhaps, but the better half of his intellect.

Strange bedfellows—poet and pedant: but with things as they were some compromise had to be made. That such an alliance was not joined without some misgivings on the poet's part we are at liberty to suspect: but Spenser (the little man with "short haire, little hands and little cuffs") seems to have been content

enough to knuckle under. He was at their disposal. The gods of Kirke and Harvey were not really after his heart, yet he set himself to worship them on this side idolatry. Their prosiness infected him. How far he had been won over from the popular cause we may judge from his own words. In Ireland he had heard the voice of the Bard, the natural songs of a people—and this is what he thought:

Surely they savoured of sweete witt and good invention, but skilled not of the goodly ornaments of Poetrie: yet were they sprinkled with some pretty flowers of theyre owne naturalle devise which gave good grace and comliness unto them, the which it is greate pittye to see so abused, to the gracing of wickedness and vice, which would with good usage serve to beautifye and adorne vertue. This evill custom therefore needeth reformation.¹

Is not this the same hesitant, antipathetic note that Sidney sounded in his discussion of the old ballad of Chevy Chase? Who touches pitch must needs be defiled. Henceforward, then, the poet must take far more care to preserve himself with kid-glove dignities and goodly ornaments. Instead of "being himself" he must set himself to be "good". Self-consciousness was a necessary virtue.

Unfortunately in attempting the twofold end, "to teach and to delight", the poet had put his heart and head at cross-purposes. What instinct urged him desire, intellect forbade. Since the works of ignorance were the works of darkness what else was spontaneity but the prompting of wickedness and vice? Bewildered by these two conflicting voices, the poet might seek to compromise: never again could he be quite natural.

Compromise he did. If, as the humanists argued, poetry was an art of "imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it in his word *Mimesis*, that is to say, a representing, *counterfetting*",² what was there to prevent him hiding his real thoughts—prevari-

¹ "View of the State of Ireland."

² "Apologie for Poetrie."

cating? Always at his ear was the second of his voices salving his conscience with ready arguments: "the poet nothing affirms and therefore never lyeth." In so far as moral "teaching" was concerned his duty would be adequately fulfilled so long as he reproduced the conclusions arrived at for him by his masters (i.e. scholars, philosophers and the Ancients)—always provided, of course, that he rendered them more pleasurable by supplying the goodly ornament of form—what oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed, in other words. To invent was really no part of his duties. With this flattering unction laid against his heart the poet proceeded to dissemble.

In the beginning, prospects seemed fair enough: there were such copious stocks of ready-made material waiting to be reworked that he was kept more than busy, without thought of what must happen ultimately when the storehouse of the Classics was exhausted. Dazzled by his enthusiasm for the new-old learning, he could not as yet foresee that it was leading him only to a dead-end. It did not occur to him that his work was second-hand, at best a second-best: or that if he never lied neither did he ever utter the whole truth.

I wote my rymes bene rough and rudely drest. . . .

Resort of people doth my griefs augment,
The walled townes doe worke my greater woe;
The forest wide is fitter to resound
The hollow Echo of my carefull cries. . . .

Hollow echo is right. We feel, even while we admire its fluency, that this is false modesty, the voice faked. All this ruralizing is a pretence; part of the general *imitatio*, maybe—but now the poet's sincerity of meaning is no longer intimate, immediate: it is only to be found *behind* the words, not *in* them, as it was formerly in, say, "Alysoun" or the stark nakedness of "Piers Plowman". Spontaneous utterance has been replaced by a highly calculating diction. Ben Jonson hit the

nail on the head when he declared: "Spenser writ no language." Truths once offered neat—straight—now suffer a dilution, distortion. Re-serving dulls their real flavour, piquancy is lost. As a medium of expression poetry has ceased to be forthright, has become instead elliptical. The poet has gained enormously in *savoir faire*, is far, far better dressed than formerly; only his manner has somehow grown distant, so affected that we can no longer be sure about what he is really thinking. He has ceased to be one of us; and even while we note and approve the changes, we cannot help feeling that on the whole we liked him better as he was before—impersonal, unpresuming and rough-shod.

Surely it is for this reason that Spenser, for all his earnest moralizing, fails to achieve moral earnestness. His precepts are borrowed, his religion fails to inspire—it lacks the genuine Calvinistic terror, and even his ecstasies are more than somewhat mannered, too, too ideal. The world of the "Faerie Queene" is a world of eclectic ideas and twice removed from reality. The attempt to balance intellect with emotion (orthodoxy with tradition) is a failure: the two only succeed in cancelling out one another and the final effect is one of a colourless neutrality. This is the first forfeit for the poet's counterfeiting—his voice ceases to carry conviction.

So much for *imitatio*.

Even more serious were the consequences of the poet's desertion of society, though at first he was not conscious of a loss, glorying as he did in his own self-importance, feeling himself well rid of baser ties. It is perfectly true that "all humanists—as humanists—have been individualists. As individualists they have nothing to offer to the mob."¹ But the further he shrank from the mob the more did the Renaissance poet feel his isolation: to remedy which, and in his eagerness to ape the Ancients to the last letter, he did his best to insure himself against the misfortunes of an unsympathetic world

¹ T. S. Eliot: *Essays Ancient and Modern*. P. 83.

by securing the favours of some patron—content to accept a position of subservience in the new order of literature.

Here again Spenser is faced with a contradiction. As an apostle of the new learning it is up to him to proclaim this the Age of Gold returning; himself a second Virgil hymning a new Maecenas. He does his best, keeping up *imitatio* to the bitter end of life, but it is clear enough that he realizes that he has placed himself in an impossible situation.

But ah!, Maecenas is yclad in claye
And great Augustus long ygoe is dead
And all the worthies liggen wrapt in leade,
That matter made for Poets on to play:
For ever, who in derring-doe was dreade,
The loftie verse of hem was loved aye.

But after vertue gan for age to stoope,
And mightie manhode brought a bedde of ease
The vaunting Poets found nought worth a pease
To put in peace among the learned troupe:
Tho gan the streames of flowing wittes to cease
And sonne-bright honour pend in shamefull coupe.

And if that any buddes of Poesie,
Yet of the old stocke, gan to shoote agayne,
Or it mens follies mote be forst to fayne
And rolle with reste in rymes of rybaudrye;
Or, as it sprong, it wither must agayne:
Tom Piper makes us better melodie.

However much he may regret it, the Past is dead and in his heart he knows it. The Present?—a worthless, ignominious age: besides, he has abjured his fellows: he cannot, will not, “rolle with reste”. Procul, o procul este profani! The world and its swinish multitudes (the unhappy men of Munster whom he would quite willingly have seen exterminated)—are beneath him. He has reached the top-floor of the Ivory Tower in which he has voluntarily immured himself, retiring into a time-

less world of his own, and the doors are locked behind him.
Where next? The Future?

There is only one answer:

O pierlesse Poesye! where is then thy place
If nor in Princes pallace thou doe sitt
(And yet is Princes pallace the most fitt,)
Ne brest of baser worth doth thee embrace,
Then make thee winges of thine aspyring witt
And, whence thou camst, flye backe to heaven apace.

Nihilism. The last escape. The flight-from-reality principle falls like a blight upon his verse. Yet see how, even in this extremity Spenser still tries to convince himself of the rightness of his choice. If he could, he would still like to justify the renunciation of native tradition and all things barbarous in beauty. But he cannot. Every line he wrote seems tinged with faint regret. From all the discriminating, copy-book morality of the "Faerie Queene", there emerges only one theme that appeals to us directly—the theme of change. Not accidentally either. It stands out as Spenser's sole personal contribution to the thought of the poem. Admittedly, it sorts well with the rest of the classical convention ("quantum mutatus ab illo", "eheu fugaces" and so forth) but it recurs so insistently that we cannot fail to interpret it as meaning something more. For now that he has denied himself his own Present, now that he feels himself thus isolated, what else can poet do but bewail the fact of Mutability?

For she the face of earthly things so changed
That all which Nature had establisht first
In good estate, and in meet order ranged
She did pervert, and all their statutes burst:
And all the world's fair frame (which none yet durst
Of gods or men to alter or misguide)
She alter'd quite; and made them all accurst
That God had blest, and did at first provide
In that still happy state for ever to abide.

If this is not a wishful-thinking back to mediaevalism what is? The mere fact of his identification with the powers-that-be prevents his fixing the blame for this unhappy alteration; he is left clutching at air to explain it. He has failed to recognize that change is but one aspect of a necessary evolution: and yet he half feels his failure. It makes him melancholy.

So it is with all who came after him. In the seventeenth century, cavaliers and metaphysicals alike, Suckling and Cowley, Herrick and Donne, are under the same cloud. In the eighteenth century it has become a pose: the nineteenth seeks to capitalize upon it as the *mal du siècle* of Romanticism: failing which the twentieth, stony in despair, finds only a waste land.

Not for nothing is Spenser called "the poets' poet": he had made the choice by which *they* must thereafter abide. The attempt to make poetry "careful", whatever else it achieved, only ended by making it "carefull" (as he was first to admit).

Merely to bemoan that English poetry, in its "still happy state", took a wrong turning would be as futile as to repeat Spenser's mawdliness. The course of poetry never did run smooth: therefore we cannot usefully consider what might have become of it had not the Renaissance supervened, making the native stream so turgid with foreign elements. As well criticize Evolution for allowing a cross-breed, or Nature for permitting the Flood. What we cannot help regretting, however, is the fact that in the process poetry should so have lost the saving grace of being popular. It was all very fine for the Muse to take on lofty airs but what was there in the nature of the change which brought about this fatal divorce, this estrangement from Life? The change is there, deny it who will. We cannot deny it; and while it may be vain to demand, "Was it worth it?" "Was it inevitable?", surely we may speculate in other ways, asking, "Was it necessary?"

The usual assumption, naturally, is that it *was*. According to Professor L  gouis, "if we consider the state of English verse when Spenser began to sing—and it is hard to exaggerate its

wooden stiffness or its chaotic licence—the rich variety and all-but-infallible skill of the Shepheard's Calendar strike us as scarcely less than miraculous".¹ Is not this a case of special pleading? Is the improvement really so hard to exaggerate? What about the folk-songs, the caroles, ballads, or the lyric speeches in the plays? This wooden stiffness, where is it to be found save in the patched metres, poulterers'-measures of the earlier humanist poetasters? It may be found exhibited, no doubt, in most Tudor and early Elizabethan song-books and miscellanies, in the work of such fellows as Churchyard, Bryan, Turbervile, Gascoigne (though not, perhaps, in Sackville); but these, though obvious, were no more than a handful. The heritage of English poetry was not in *their* keeping. In his desire to apotheosize Spenser's achievement, the good professor has thought fit to take these bookmen as representative, at the same time belittling the less conventional but more popular attainment of the age which immediately preceded the "new" poet. It is an old trick, getting us to look at one hand while with the other he whips away the better half of the facts. It magnifies his particular line of argument and minimizes the general truth. Previous chapters have been at pains to point out that the great virtue of folk-poetry was its utter lack of self-consciousness in matters of metre, style and diction. Far from being trouble-finding, it was not even trouble-taking; one of its most obvious failings, indeed, had been its everlasting carelessness in matters of form. That, however, had been one of its *necessary* characteristics. Being primarily oral, how could it be either wooden or stiff? Given the chance, the forms would surely have evolved without the tinkering of scholars and theorists. The "language difficulty", which bulked so large in the eyes of the scholarly writers, would have solved itself. It is a matter of congratulation that the Elizabethan drama, chiefly because it was of popular origins, contrived to keep alive the language of "common form" in English poetry as long as it did, otherwise

¹ E. Léguais: *Spenser*. P. 60.

a narrow and stifling convention might have tyrannized it long before the age of Pope.

All the new cultural patterns imported from abroad, all the borrowed topiary work which the scholars sought to foist upon English verse could not, in themselves, achieve anything much better than a pastiche. *Imitatio* produced only *contaminatio*. Here and there the foreign growth took root and lived: more often than not both it and the native stem on which it had been grafted withered and died.

See what happened to our mythology. The gods and goddesses of Rome, the nymphs and fawns of Greece, have they ever been *quite* at home in an English landscape? The refusal to accept, or at any rate to develop, the ancient Teuton-mythos has involved a serious lacuna; a lack which even the Bible has failed adequately to supplement. Considering the development of major poetic form in this country, it is a matter of lasting regret that the national mythology should have been so completely "driven out of the work of the greater artists".¹ Like the folk-poetry of which it was a part, it continued an underground existence, showing its face from time to time in such low-life publications as Andrew Tooke's *Pantheon*. The consequences of this great denial may be observed in "Paradise Lost", more obviously still in the creaking structure of Cowley's "Davideis". The seventeenth century was the first to feel the pinch, the first to realize that the severance with pristine myth and heroic epos was not without its penalties. Classical paganism and Christian theology were brought in to fill the gap—a hybrid breed. A poor substitute for the mythology that might have been.

We conclude then that the change was not only unfortunate in some ways, but that it was not even strictly necessary: or, to put it more extremely, that there was a sort of betrayal on the poet's part. It must be said by way of extenuation that the change was forced upon him by a variety of circumstances—by

¹ Ifor Evans: *Tradition and Romanticism*. P. 80.

changing social conditions—by a sudden loss of economic and (which was far worse) religious security, by the invention of printing, by the heady intoxication of humanist enthusiasm. The fact remains that it had landed him in a wellnigh hopeless situation.

There was, however, one solution which Spenser, in his first despair, had not foreseen. Being trapped on the top of his ivory tower did not mean that the poet must necessarily remain there for the rest of his days. If he was now cut off from the world outside he could, in the absence of any better occupation, study *himself*. Why not turn inwards?

It was a solution, nevertheless, open only to noble minds. "Look in thy heart and write", Sidney had said: unfortunately as often as not there was little there to make a song about. Donne was the first (and in some ways how much the best!) to attempt it with anything like success. He, in turn, attracted a host of would-be metaphysicals eager to follow his example and exploit their lesser selves. Driven to idealism by the combined forces of the Renaissance-cum-Reformation, some poets turned introvert. Their art became subjective: and in the sense that it had lost its former objectivity poetry constricted, became a lesser thing.

Even in this predicament, however, there was still the possibility of wellnigh infinite variations on the solitary theme. If he had not the obvious stature of a Donne, the poet might hope to command attention by sheer force of personality, by passionate intensity (as Crashaw), by excessive piety and sweetness of nature (as Herbert); or he could try to inveigle men's interest by turning curious, enigmatic, obscurantist. He might even let the world go hang and be a mystic (as Vaughan and Traherne). There were a thousand ways by which he might render himself conspicuous by revealing a difference: and if all else failed he could always jig up and down, dervish-wise on his minaret, enjoying the sensation which such self-exhibitionism caused. For most men it was not a highly entertaining

spectacle, however; they might raise their eyes in momentary wonder, but only to return at once to more humdrum affairs. The poet had become such a strange fellow these days!—no accounting for anything that he did. His work and theirs no longer shared a common relevance. He had gone over to the other side. He and they were no longer on speaking terms: indeed, they had ceased to speak the same language. They no longer shared the same hopes. Let him go on dancing there on his perch, then. . . .

II

Meanwhile what had been happening down in the everyday world of men? In our discussion of the popular drama we have already noted signs of deterioration in the country's morale and hinted that it is impossible to dissociate the temper of poetry in any age from the prevailing social, ethical and economic mood. Renaissance humanism and Reformation puritanism cannot, by themselves, be held entirely responsible for the estrangement between Poetry and Life: both were separatist movements, but they did not actually set out to destroy the existing order. In any case, if, as seems probable, neither movement *directly* influenced the masses, why was it that a tradition so long established and so deeply rooted should have given way so easily?

Because the Commons (that is, the peasantry writ large) was, by its very nature, passive.

At the beginning of the sixteenth century the condition of the population of this country, rural or urban, was tolerably prosperous and contented, more so, probably, than it had ever been. With all its faults, mediaeval society, as constituted in its final form, had certain positive virtues. First, it was stable. It was, no doubt, unprogressive, utterly unenterprising, but this, too, was a virtue for it meant a more or less complete absence of baser motives. The State was organized for one purpose only, to obtain a living from the land: in one way or another everyone

was connected with the soil. Secondly, it was a society of small community groups, each of which was self-contained, homogeneous, co-operative. The group itself was independent, the individual inter-dependent. Though wide differences in status did exist, the differences were usually accepted as inevitable and just, for the State was like any other organic body: the serf's place was at the foot as the baron's was at the head. The important point is that there was no sense of invidious distinction, nothing comparable with the bickering consciousness of modern "class". Thirdly, in everything relating to daily life and economy the ultimate standards of this corporate society were invariably religious. In this respect the vast difference between the mediaeval and the modern world cannot be better illustrated than by comparing the systems of trade-apprenticeship which obtained in both. The early sixteenth-century master undertook not only to introduce the raw lad to the secrets of his craft, but gave him board and bed under his own roof as well as instructing him in the social virtues. Besides learning his trade, the apprentice looked to his master as teacher and foster-parent: the relationship between the two was primarily intimate; human, not financial. To-day a wage-contract supplies the only nexus that is thought necessary.

In a word, mediaeval society was integral. It was in fact "a public weal, which . . . is made of an order of estates and degrees, and by reason thereof, containeth in it perfect harmony".¹

Folk-poetry was, we argued, the product of such harmony. A by-product, possibly, but somehow inevitable; the child of delight, glee-born. The voice of song and dance. Only rarely did it crystallize in anything like a permanent form, and yet its influence was diffused in permanences of its own, in common life. It was an all-over influence. If it reached no very great heights it had always the saving asset of being widely received, broadcasting itself to all and sundry, which, to our present way of thinking seems more important. (We

¹ Thomas Elyot: *The Governour*.

need not pretend that folk-poetry was any better than it was: as it is, we run sufficient risk of being dubbed what Stephen Potter calls one of the "Ah, the past! critics"—it is just that we believe that the creative function of poetry has ceased to be democratic¹ and that as a consequence poetry now plays a lesser part in our national life.)

Tradition, we have argued, tends to be largely defenceless. So, too, the Commons. Both depend for their continuing welfare on custom and goodwill. Both are open to active exploitation and abuse. The sixteenth century saw the beginnings of such exploitation and abuse. Useless now to turn back the clock of "Progress" or point out individual scapegoats (though if we must have a villain in our historical piece it would surely not be that pitiful fool of a King John but that implacable and highly competent rogue, Henry VIII). What has sheep-farming and the unscrupulousness of finance to do with poetry? Much. The King's Evil which afflicted poetry from this time forth (a sort of hardening of the Muses' arteries) was an indirect consequence of the social malaise: therefore, before attempting to diagnose the former we must know something of the latter. Poetry and sociology are interlinked.

It is difficult to imagine the spiritual and mental upheaval which the sudden switch from the open-field system to the intensive, profit-seeking methods of farming must have produced in the sixteenth-century mind. It was not that the new method was in itself evil—Denmark's case is proof enough that a system of enclosures could have been introduced without disastrous social effects. It was not even that so much misery was involved—any peasantry could endure *that*²—it was the lack of obvious necessity, the blank heartlessness of it all.

¹ Is this quite the word? Possibly not, but it conveys something of what I mean. As Quiller-Couch says, "We may prate of democracy, but actually a poor child in England has little more hope than had the son of an Athenian slave to be emancipated into that intellectual freedom of which great writings are born." (*Art of Writing*. P. 34.)

² Richard Jefferies, describing the eviction of an old Wiltshire labourer from the cottage in which he had lived for seventy-three years, simply says: "It is very

"Do ye not know", sneered the landlord when the villagers protested against the seizure of their common lands, "that the King's Grace hath put down all the houses of monks, friars and nuns? Therefore now is the time come that we gentlemen will pull down the houses of such poor knaves as ye be." Sir Thomas More's account of these wholesale evictions pictures the same horror: "They muste needes departe away, poore, selye, wretched soules, men, women, husbands, wives, fatherlesse children, widowes, wofull mothers, smal in substance and much in nombre (as husbandrye requireth many handes). Away thei trudge, I say, out of their knowen and accustomed houses, fyndynge no place to reste in. . . ." ¹ What was new and infinitely more hard to bear was the awful sense of being uprooted and wilfully abandoned. All that later Elizabethan and Stuart legislation could do could not heal such a wound: and by the time that arable farming had again become profitable the cracks in the social structure had begun to widen in other directions.

Customary tenants were the first to be swept away. Freeholders and copy-holders, finding little or no protection in the courts, fared little better when their rights to the land were threatened. The majority had no established rights at all: they were entirely dependent for their welfare on the maintenance of a state of affairs in which the supply of labour was, if not always less than the demand, at least constant.

The yeomanry, that stout-hearted rural middle-class, was not so immediately affected by these changes and for another two centuries it constituted the main bulwark of the nation against the forces of social disintegration. But after the "Glorious Revolution" Whig gentry grew more rapacious, less scrupulous than ever. Land-grabbing became a fine art, and even the brawny good sense of the yeoman was not proof against it.

hard, is it not, at ninety? It is not the tyranny of anyone that has done it; it is the tyranny of circumstance, the lot of man" (*Hours of Spring*).

¹ *Utopia*.

He, too, was driven from the land. He became the shopkeeper in the same way that the peasant became the labourer—or worse, the unemployed.

Peasantry. Yeomanry. Each in turn was sacrificed. Both were possessed of a vitality and boldness of mind which might have preserved something of the traditional social fabric; the first with its sure values, its sense of freedom as primarily co-operative rather than individualistic; the second with its sturdy health and clean ethics, its ability to call its soul its own. Both refused to bow before the forces which were making agriculture the slave of commerce, for both shared the same passion for the soil. Only through contact with it could their finer qualities be fully evoked: without it they were like potters without clay. Both were deprived. Inanition followed, then decay, then extinction. The country yeomanry struggled to retain its precarious hold on the land until the latter half of the eighteenth century. The peasantry was driven from the surface of the earth much earlier.

Things were no better in the town. Aided by the mines of Mexico, capitalist influence had effected such a division of labour that the guild no longer found itself self-supporting. Masters, craftsmen and journeymen found themselves no longer in a position of mutual trust. Whereas formerly they had been able to control the entire manufacture of an article they were now reduced to undertaking only some specialized process.

Thus three crafts went to the making of a knife, the blacksmith's, the cutler's who fitted the handle, and the sheather's; while in the making of cloth each process was a craft in itself. The weaver depended on the spinner, the fuller and dyer on the weaver, and the draper on the fuller.¹

Such the beginnings of mass-production. Where formerly the various trades had conducted their affairs in a spirit of emulation, they were now driven to engage in a damaging

¹ C. M. Waters: *An Economic History of England*. P. 199.

competition, struggling to scoop the market, regardless of each other's interests. As commerce grew into big-business, so confidence in human fellowship gave place to mistrust. The word "craft" took on a new and sinister significance. *Opus* became *labor*.

"Dieu nous donne bonne adventure" had been the simple motto of the old Merchant Adventurers, but the new knights of commerce, worshippers at the shrine of Mammon, had means more forcible of making Fortune smile.

The worthy companies of "masters" soon found themselves powerless under the financial pressure of newly-rich merchants and courtiers, powerless to prevent the encroachment of joint-stock enterprises quick to seize monopolies. Without underestimating their intelligence or exaggerating their naïvety it is clear enough that their innate honesty and ethical judgment were no match against the ruthlessness of modern business methods. Like the country-folk they were an easy prey for sharks and chicaners.

By 1600 the results of these changes were becoming palpable. As prices rose so the common decencies of life declined.

This was only the beginning. There was as yet only the uneasy excitement of upheaval, no obvious break-up, no settling down into any clearly divided groups; and to make matters worse sectarian fanaticism came in to confuse all other issues. Instead of high and low estates there was now the ever-increasing contrast between fortunate and unfortunate—a subtle difference. A mad world, my masters!, in which vice and self-interest was so flauntingly successful, virtue so pitifully rewarded. Mad and wicked. Prosperity was there for all to see and yet the bulk of the population were far worse off than they had ever been—and knew it. From 1600 onwards Progress was swift, a vicious spiral and in the wake of its whirlwind passage it left a broadening trail of strikes, unemployment and an atmosphere of bitter unrest in the land. The historian may point to any number of legal reforms throughout the period (seventeenth to eighteenth

centuries), but it was quite the usual thing for these to remain dead-letters or to be administered by a corrupt officialdom: they did little to arrest or alleviate the downward trend of events.

Instead of hey trollilollis, the people's plain-song now began to bear a heavier burden:

Neighbourhed nor love is none
Treu dealyng now is fled and gone

as the late-Tudor ballad complains.

Could the native tradition in poetry have survived this undermining? It might. In a sense it did, for country-folk were stubbornly retentive—they held the outposts of mediaevalism to the last ditch—but that it suffered a high-fatal setback is only too obvious. Not only had humanism aggressively disowned it: the poet had himself lost that healthy impersonality which formerly had kept him in such close touch with people and with things. He had become increasingly concerned with his own private salvation and in the process was turning more and more into the recluse. (Mediaeval life and faith, whatever they lacked in other directions, had always preserved the poet from himself.)

Thus slighted, what else could the folk-poem do but hide its worthless head? Naturally, once its crudeness had been mercilessly derided it became aware of its own shortcomings—and turned bashful. As capitalism had seized control of commerce so intellectualism had cornered letters. Poetry had become the privilege of the lucky. Well might Sir Philip Sidney sing, or Grenville, or Raleigh, or even the gentle Herbert; the ordinary fellow was in no mood to listen to them—whose fathers had evicted *his* fathers, carving out prosperous estates and private Arcadias from what had once been common land. The economist is right when he remarks that

the brilliant age which begins with Elizabeth gleams against a background of social squalor and misery. The descendant of the illiterate, bloody-minded baron who is muzzled by

Henry VII becomes a courteous gentleman who rhapsodizes in verse at the Court of Gloriana. But all that the peasants know is that his land-agents are harsher.¹

Let the high ones have their fine songs: they could afford them. If the ordinary man gave up the cause of poetry in disgust who could blame him?

Actually he did no such thing. Though the nuclei of community-life became increasingly scattered and divided there were still those who never quite forgot the old customs. The fact that social gatherings were now less carefree and less wholehearted did not mean that habits of song and dance were altogether forgotten. The village minstrel continued to remind his audiences of that unacknowledged literature which had been theirs in a way which official literature could never be; only now little or nothing was added to the existing repertoires. The main forces of the creative impulse had been transferred and dissipated.

But the poetry of earth is never dead. Driven underground, it hibernated through the long winter of its discontents, showing itself, violet-like, when times seemed more propitious. There were years in the eighteenth century, for instance, when something like the old stability returned—and we have more than one fine country-air to prove it. In the North and to an even greater extent in Scotland the tradition of song never quite died out. What else are the lyrics of Burns but folk-songs exquisitely retouched? ² How much did Scott owe to the shepherds? But we anticipate.

What became of the tradition in the towns? Conditions there were so fluctuant that it was not long before all trace of it was lost in the Elizabethan *mêlée*. The demand for popular books was so voracious that to the countryman-come-to-town it seemed that writing was just as likely a means of earning a

¹ R. H. Tawney: *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century*. P. 193.

² Cf. *infra*. P. 201.

livelihood as any other. Long before the close of the sixteenth century we note the entry of the free-lance hacks, pioneers of the Grub Street that was to be and the Fleet Street that is—Nashe, Greene, Deloney, Chettle and others of the same kidney. Earlier still there had been others who catered for less scholarly tastes, Awdeley, Harman and such-like—writers of popular caveats. “The Merie Tales of the Mad Men of Gotam”, “Howleglass”, “The Geystes of Skoggan”—some of the titles are enough to show how town-folk were ceasing to adopt a positive attitude towards literature. Already they had begun to prefer the more passive rôle of being entertained. As literary and the supply of reading material increased so did this tendency to accept rather than to create. As reading became a cult, so the vocal arts were neglected. Meaning came through the eye instead of through the mouth as formerly. Without ever being aware of it, the masses were becoming progressively inarticulate.

It is easy to see what happened, if only by analogy. When cheap, ready-made bread was to be had at any baker's, why should the housewife use her own oven, particularly when there was so much else to occupy her time and distract her attention? What odds if the bought fare *did* lack the homely, farmhouse flavour?—if the ingredients were not always up to the old standards?—if the professional's product showed obvious signs of hastiness in its preparation? What if she *did* lose the knack of making her own? . . . A natural tendency, but one we cannot help regretting.

While it is mainly in London that we must look to find the beginnings of modern journalism it was not long before literary professionalism invaded the countryside, seeking to sell its mass-produced wares in the highways and byways. Even the ballad became a catchpenny piece. In Shakespeare's day it could be bought in any market-place, half news-sheet, half poem: and in such variety! “Here's one to a very doleful tune. How a usurer's wife was brought to bed of twenty money bags at a burden. . . . Here's another ballad, Of a fish that appear'd

on the coast on Wednesday the fourscore of April, forty thousand fathom above water. . . ."—and if even the salesmanship of an Autolycus proved incapable of foisting such unnatural themes upon the rustics there were others in plenty on more familiar lines which were sure to prove acceptable; "Why, this is a passing merry one and goes to the tune of 'Two maids wooing a man': there's scarce a maid westward but she sings it, t'is in request I can tell you."

The natural good taste of country-folk was proof against such trash . . . for a time. They preferred the songs of their forefathers: only now that they had less and less of their own making to add to the existing store it was not to be expected that they should hold out indefinitely against the rising tide of print. Gusto was gone. Rural taste grew less and less discriminating. To-day it reaches nadir in the bathetic lines of the "popular song".

Such a book as Tusser's *Poyntes of Good Husbandry*,¹ printed by Tottel in 1557, is worth noting. It shows how even at that time practical instruction in agricultural matters was only acceptable in verse: the author taking every precaution to point out that,

By practice and ill speeding
These lessons had their breeding
And not by hearesay or reeding.

The immediate and far-reaching success of this book can only be ascribed to its uncanny knack of hitting-off *exactly* the countryman's innate love of nursery-rhyme and hard-headed aphorisms—doggerel soothsayings that profited a man in his labours.

When we read,

North winds send hail, South winds bring rain
East winds we bewail, West winds blow amain
North-east is too cold, South-east too warm
North-west is too bold, South-west doth no harm

¹ Republished in attractive format by *Country Life*; ed. D. Hartley.

we cannot help wondering how much of it is Tusser and how much the age-old, gnomic weather-wisdom of the centuries. Is not this the very type of muttered mnemonic that the ploughman has always treasured, from the superstitious Saxon to the mechanized farmer of to-day? Evidently the rustics thought so; from the start they accepted it as genuine, for long after it had been forgotten by the literary reader, the "Hundred Points of good Husbandry" remained a firm favourite in many a rural home. No other writer managed quite so well to find the intimate level of rural consciousness. Barnabe Googe tried; Drayton might have succeeded had he not been so top-heavy with scholarship, but after 1600 writers on country matters (Gervase Markham, for instance) thought best to stick to prose. By that time Tusser had become "old Tusser".

Tastes were changing. Penurious wits soon found that verse was scarcely a paying proposition: it took too much time and even the most rakehellly rhymers found themselves at a disadvantage in the literary racket. A scurrilous tract, a pamphlet "yarkt up in a night and a day"—that was the thing to catch the eye and ensure a quick turnover. If the popular cause had been driven underground in the country it is no less true that in London it sank into a noisome underworld. The bulk of Elizabethan literature, drama included, is very far from being "polite". The Marprelate controversy, Greene's series of Conny-catching pamphlets, Dekker's *Newes from Hell*, *The Hye Way to the Spyttel House*, *The Penilesse Parliament of Threadbare Poets*, *The Scourge of Folly*, *The Gul's Hornbooke*—what are they but the retchings of an age violently upset? They echo the turbulent hysteria of the time in a way that the studied, detached work of the humanists does not, and yet, despite their debauchery, these authors—"lewtering luskes, lazy lozells, rowsy ragged rabblement" as they are—still hold fast, even in their prose, to the vigours and exuberances of common speech. There is the old love of alliteration (now done to death). There is the old forthrightness, windiness, scorn of all convention and

restraint. Nothing is pretentious. They still speak, rather than write, "symplye and truelye, with such usual wordes and termes as is among us wel known and frequented" (—and what else is this but a word-for-word anticipation of what Wordsworth and Coleridge thought necessary to claim as their "discovery" in the Preface to the Lyrical Ballads—the "language really used by men").

Unless it were "in Prince's pallace" there seemed to be no place for the poet in the new order. His lodging had become a lazar house. Even Lyly, who in his thirteen years at Court can scarcely have been without opportunities for gaining "influence", confessed himself beaten at the end: "Three legacies I bequeath. Patience to my creditors, Melancholy to my friends and Beggary to my family." Nashe, much lower down the social scale, protested that poets received less than cobblers.

Piers Plowman had become Pierce Penilesse: but even when he found himself in straitened circumstances he refused to turn traitor to the cause. And he had his reward. Because he would not change he preserved something of universal sympathy. Necessity became the mother of his invention. All the immorality and dross of this hand-to-mouth, snook-cocking, low-life literature was not without results: it gave us on the one hand the "popular" essay, on the other hand the novel. After all, it is not such a far cry from Nashe, Greene or Deloney to Smollett and the eighteenth-century picaresque. They cleared the path for Earle and Overbury who in turn made way for Addison and Steele: and so by devious, hidden ways the voice of the people came to be echoed in the high-court of *belles-lettres*. But in its passage it had become the voice of prose.

Looking back, we cannot fail to see some of the reasons for this dismal change, nor fail, even at this late hour, to feel some of the contemporary bitterness at its causes. The decline in morality and the rapid developments of an acquisitive society were initiated, we feel, from above, politically: the integrity of the people, nine out of ten of whom were peasants of one sort

or another, was sound. Never say *they* did it! The historian may explain it with perfect equanimity as "the rejection by social theory of the whole conception of an objective standard of economic equity. The law of nature had been invoked by mediaeval writers as a moral restraint upon economic self-interest. By the seventeenth century, a significant revolution had taken place. 'Nature' had come to connote, not divine ordinance, but human appetites, and natural rights were invoked by the individualism of the age as a reason why self-interest should be given free play";¹ for our part we cannot be so readily content to see it as a bloodless process only.

The peasant (call him to-day the man-in-the-street, for such he has become) is by nature conservative: he is born a dupe to policies of *laissez-faire*. He trusts. He is incapable of foreseeing the consequences of any imposition which does not *immediately* threaten his welfare. His field of vision being so limited, he is content to leave the framing and direction of policies in the hands of his superiors: and, though he resents intrusion and is suspicious of novelty, he has been so long trained in the school of endurance that he will put up with almost anything.

From Tudor times until . . . (who shall say when?) the secret of the ruling body has been that it has recognized this blend of characteristics, exploiting the strength and taking advantage of the weakness. What else is the development of English political democracy but the story of a struggle between the powers of self-interest and disinterest, reaction and reform? On the whole we like to think that this tug-of-war has swayed more than less in favour of the Many (most of whom, however, are still spectators), but we are foolish if we pretend to think that we have extricated ourselves from the mess in which the sixteenth century first plunged us. Now more than ever every section of society is deeply implicated. There is no considerable body of English folk who derive their health and

¹ R. H. Tawney: *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*. P. 180.

sanity from the soil. The peasant, cheated of his land, has perforce turned hireling, labourer and finally the industrial artisan. The yeoman now keeps his store or dons a bowler-hat.

"What of it?" the reader may interpose, doubtless impatiently. "Are they not better-off than before?—Would you deny the whole of England's history after 1600, Empire included?—What is it that you seek to prove?"

Just this, that the basic unity of English society being undermined, the arts of common speech—and culture generally—were consigned to the limbo of lost causes. Next (which seems platitudinous but is not), that poetry is bred, not made. There is an evolution of poetic, as well as of organic, form and the integrity of any literature depends upon the transmission, less of bare mechanics than of a complex pattern of habits, customs and beliefs. Until 1600 the State had been as near as anything identified with the Church and with the land: Everyman might have said, "*L'état c'est moi*" with far more truth than a Louis XIV could ever claim. Its ordering was such as not to admit of doubt: when everything was so established, man's mental and spiritual energies were not all burnt up with social, sectarian, political and economic issues. If freedom be knowledge of necessity even the serf may be said to have enjoyed a freedom unknown to twentieth-century man. Integration bred integrity. Once that was lost it was left to each particular soul to find its own salvation. The Muse, which formerly had been the outcome of the body corporate, was reduced to expressing itself through the minds of self-chosen individuals. Poetry turned isolationist.

The peasant had one other characteristic, however, one which was too often overlooked. If he was slow to see through a deception (not because he was dull-witted but because his nature did not prompt him to expect it), he was equally slow to forgive once he knew he had been wronged. But here again his weakness ultimately redounded on his own head—the ruling classes were the winners. He had been cheated, yes, but by

whom? Poison poured in at the top had permeated to the depths of society, but his position was such that he was only aware of the effects of its venom in close-ups—the dishonesty of his neighbour, the remorselessness of his land-agent, the ill-gotten gains of usurers. The causes he could not see. As a result, in very helplessness, he fell to reviling all and sundry: he was so tantrum-twitched that he was ready to snarl at anyone within reach. Double-dealing being so common, his indignation grew indiscriminate, dissipated itself in unruly brawlings which only defeated themselves. Which, apart from minor inconveniences, fitted in quite admirably with the political plan.

Society had turned internecine. Instead of folk-song, invective or a puzzled silence; instead of the harpist's measured declamation or the earnest rhythms of the tabor, we get the staccato rantings of tub-thumpers. Instead of poems, pamphlets. *Greene v. Harvey, Harvey v. Greene, Nashe v. Harvey* . . . so it begins. We know that to some extent this conflict was all part of a game ("good for sales"), and that the convention of literary quarrelling dates back to the "flytings" of the Makers and to Skelton but even so it is but one of many signs that all was not well.

Skelton!

The very name is like a knell. . . . That atrocious little man, first *poeta laureatus*, macaronic clown, screaming socialism in the face of Wolsey and the King (and barely getting away with his life as a result). If any one man might have saved the English tradition it was he. No peasant he, but a country parson—and a pushing courtier when he had the chance—yet a man of the people at all times. Though an enthusiastic Latinist he had no scrap of reverence for the Ancients: he remained irrepressibly English. If ever a poet desired to be popular it was Skelton. Though ambition made him play the sedulous ape to ladies of high birth, bidding him be gracious to Mistress Margaret Hussey, he was never really at home except in the company of hussies of his own, plain Margaret Milkduck

or that old trollope Elinor Rumming. Alas that he should have been so slight a figure, such a merry-Andrew, one who wrote

Only for delyte
Or elles for despyte,

one who was too obvious a target for disrepute! What he achieved was too easily derided as shabby, bastard stuff, broken-down lyricism: he suffered from a fault common to all commoners—he could never take himself quite seriously. If he had been less irresponsible, this original Colin Clout might have succeeded, where Spenser and the rest failed, in making poetry rub shoulders with the crowd. For the poet who wrote

Wofully araid
My blode man for thee ran.
It may not be naid;
My body blo and wan
Wofully araid.

stood in the direct line of mediaeval traditions. With more of warmth and weight and he might have been a Rabelais of English verse. . . .

But he remains a might-have-been. Lost causes have a habit of being irretrievable and Skelton's inadequacy only appears to indicate that the cause we have been following was doomed to go down even as early as the opening of the sixteenth century. Star of the morrow grey, he would *not* renounce freshness and freedom: would *not* take pains or force himself to fain—and so he paid the penalty of the intellectuals' censure. Yet his was the careless, carefree, hit-or-miss method by which miracles might have been (and occasionally were) achieved, the selfless style that was not always on its dignity and cared not if it was worthless so long as it was free to prattle to its heart's content. It is the untutored, the untutorable voice—

Warbling in the vale
Among the birds smale

Dug dug
Jug jug
Good year and good luck
With chuck chuck chuck chuck

—mad as you please. Skelton had not forgotten, we think, the “anonymous” songs, “Summer is ycumen in” and all the rest. Nor did Shakespeare with his greasy Joan, nor Nashe, though he was born to wallow in the hotbed of plaguy London:

The fields breathe sweet, the daisies kiss our feet
Young lovers meet, old wives a-sunning sit
In every street these tunes our ears do greet
Cuckoo jug-jug pu-wee to-witta-woo!
Spring, the sweet Spring!

Not everything was lost: there are some things that cannot die.

CHAPTER V

WORLD-LOSERS AND WORLD-FORSAKERS

WE left the poet rather at a loss. Tower-trapped. We took leave of him wildly gesticulating, on a Stylites eminence of his own erection.

The "official" poet, that is. For, in assuming a position of aristocracy, by severing its connection with common things and common speech, poetry had identified itself once and for all with LITERATURE. And in so doing we have argued that it committed not merely a social but an artistic apostasy. "Peerless" it might become, but never more "divine".

From now on there were two main courses open to the poet as man-of-letters—either to plunge on into the abstract world of "style" and ideas or to follow his own injunction, "Quaere intra te". In other words he could go for form as an end in itself, or turn introspect.

In either case he was foredoomed. The Renaissance, "still climbing after knowledge infinite", and the Reformation by challenging the universal authority of Ecclesia, had claimed a complete self-sufficiency for humankind. With superb and reckless daring, Humanism had undertaken to achieve what had hitherto been left for Religion to perform. The ambition was fine, but supremely overweening. This Lutheran freedom was, in fact, *too* complete, too sudden; and the dangers of a lay indiscipline could not but affect the quality of the poet's conception of his art. Mediaeval man had seen poetry as a means to an end; and the end, though it might be through his fellow-men, through social utterance, was always in God. Now, however, poetry claimed immortalities of its own. The quest for perfect spiritual liberty, combined with the lack of religious or metaphysical certitude turned men's heads to believe that

Art was sufficient unto itself. Poetry, too, became an Absolute. A fundamental error.

Supposing he did not become idolatrous of pure Form: how if the poet looked in his heart and wrote? In that case he was still separated from the ultimate truth: he could still only claim a hearing by exhibiting a difference, as we said before. By putting his own individuality before his work he had raised an unnatural barrier between himself and his audience. True poetry, as Maritain says, and as we have insisted from the beginning, is something quite distinct from fine writing: "Literature puts the grin of personality on the work. Literature is to art what vanity is to the moral life. Poetry . . . is to one what grace is to the other."¹

Henceforward everything the poet did seemed further to emphasize what previously had not been noticed, a distinction between himself and those for whom he existed. A separate-ness. A disenchantment. People seemed to have changed: he himself had changed; everything was uncertain, veering. He was so *alone*. Society seemed to turn a deaf ear, or to be frankly hostile—at best he could only appeal to certain of its more sympathetic sections. Communication had become extraordinarily difficult, necessitating an elaborate technique. All that was left for him to believe in was himself and/or his work. *Cano ergo sum*. Bowered in the bleak eminence of his tower the poet could either concentrate his energies on pure form (—in which case he became a "Classic") or on the problems of his own soul (and so, little by little, a "Romantic").

I. TOWARDS CLASSICISM

Once the Renaissance fervour had had time to cool its heels it was the first of these two methods which seemed the more likely to lead to a solution. *Imitatio* became decorum. Seven-

¹ J. Maritain: *Art and Scholasticism*. P. 98.

teenth-century science and philosophy was already debunking the wisdom of the Ancient World: free-thinking challenged all authorities and faiths; but none of these developments had altered the ideal of good writing. Even if Descartes had ousted Aristotle it was still "l'ordre, la netteté, la précision, l'exactitude qui règnent dans les bons livres". In a private world words at least retained their reality, and since they were in fact the poet's sole remaining wealth they were not counters to be squandered at random. As a consequence the finer points of style became his chief preoccupation. The fact that his range was so limited (—confined to a top-floor room, so to speak), only meant that his duty to cultivate his little plot intensively was the more pronounced.

Hence "correctness". Contenting himself with a limited aim, the poet continued to bind himself to the rules of orthodoxy, even, in certain matters, to take the vow of silence.¹ Art was nothing but "good sense reduced to method": therefore his chief concern must be to select, to arrange, to be careful that everything should be under complete control. Not a word must be out of place, not one unnecessary. Texture was all.

Symmetry, propriety, restraint. We do not have to insist how far removed this was from the traditional manner, from Skelton's babblings or the endless repetitions of the ballads: different . . . foreign. But the countryman is by nature far from being urbane, or wishing to be. Diffuseness is a part of him. Since everything to him is real, nothing is gratuitous. The more self-evident a thing is the truer it becomes for him. Words can never become substitutes for life. They are not *in themselves* sacred (though they have potencies which perhaps only he understands); rather they are common property, like earth and air, so he is never self-conscious in his use of them. This uncritical impulse prompts him to spread himself among them; and if this leads to his saying the same thing over and over again, it is no matter. Though he has his moments of

¹ Cf. Matthew Arnold's criticism: "Gray never *spoke out*."

miraculous economy in language he is not, and cannot be, dainty in such matters. Because his psychology is more child-like than that of the intellectual, he has animist tendencies which make him more ready to believe that words *are* things: certainly the distinction between the two is never so apparent as it is to us. And because his outlook is nearer the primitive, nearer to the fee-fi-fo-fumming speech of Neanderthal Man, he is infinitely more capable of appreciating the lurking significance of sound. The nonsense of "Binnorie", for instance, or the "hey-nonnynonnies" of folk-song have more to them than all the carefully weighed vowels and consonants, all the split-hair aestheticisms of "classical" verse. For the peasant, problems of diction, form and style do not exist. For him poetry exists nor in the heart nor in the head. Any attempt to pin it down would result only in atrophy: it would cease to be what, for him, it is—the unconscious expression of his whole personality.

No wonder, then, that the new poetry was caviare to the general. It was not just that the new style was so different from the old. A Gothic cathedral may be compact of various styles, nave of stolid Norman, clerestory of chaste Lancet, windows of writhing Curvilinear, towers of soaring Perpendicular, and yet they agree. The new style did not agree: it was as if they had tried to rear Brunelleschi's dome on Beverley Minster. To plain folk it seemed that there was something almost indecent in the very attempt: it left most of them feeling almost as if some outrage had been committed against their native instincts.

For the "official" poet, however, there could be no retraction. He had made his own, narrow, Procrustean bed and proceeded to make himself as comfortable as possible upon it. If he had renounced the world and all its works, at least he could be master within the narrow walls of his Tower. He could pass the time with the playthings provided for his lonely solace—books and words—varying and delicately revarying the infinite permutations and combinations of cadence, polishing each line

until it was impeccable. He could play with the infinite jigsaw of letters, reducing it to a system of Euclidean theorems in which nothing was proved except his wit. If he were completely detached, he could become the complete aesthete; and if he could not win the ears of everyone he would attract the discriminating eye of a coterie.

This is the true "classical" solution. Waller was the first to try it. Pope achieved it.

It would, of course, be the height of exaggeration to pretend that any poet was ever an out-and-out aesthete or a hundred per cent. introvert. Even Pope was something of a moralist. It is the obsession with form, the delight in words *qua* words—and an increasing lack of content—that we wish to remark.

There were others who, while deeming restraint a necessary virtue, did not find the conditions of their confinement quite so congenial. Before the seventeenth century was far advanced the storehouse of the Ancients had been pretty thoroughly rifled, its novelties mostly exhausted. The thought of re-working old themes was no longer quite so attractive: besides, the translators had already given most of them a more than decent exhumation and reburial. And though the forces of ignorance had been conquered, the full man was still not satisfied. The Reformation had left him with a spiritual spleen, the Renaissance with an intellectual headache.

The difficulties under which he now laboured are reflected in Dryden's "Religio Laici", perhaps the most representative poem of the whole seventeenth century. The choice of title is worth noticing. In the Preface he admits that "Deism, or the Principles of Natural Worship, are only the dying flames of reveal'd Religion": but as a rationalist he is obliged to affirm that "whatsoever is obscure is concluded not necessary to be known". The poem itself reveals any number of similar contradictions. He would like better than anything to believe,

That Truth in Church Tradition must be found.
Such an Omniscient Church we wish indeed!

but he cannot: such a Church no longer exists—only a choice of schisms. It is a bad thing, he thinks, when the individual must find his own solution without the aid of authority

And every man will make himself a creed.

On the other hand he is the first to stick out for personal independence:

For my Salvation must its Doom reveive
Not from what OTHERS but what *I* believe.

After all, he says, the rules of salvation are simple enough; a common-sense reading of the Scriptures is all that is needed. But here again the guidance is unsure, for

The Fly-blown Text creates a crawling Brood;
And turns to Maggots what was meant for Food,

and so it goes on: he twists this way and that, like an animal pacing its cage.

It was not until the New Learning had been thoroughly assimilated that the poet realized that the intellectual glory of the Renaissance was an illusion; that the real afflatus did not, after all, inhere in the brain. Where, then, could it lie, seeing that reason was the only guide and that everything else in human nature was but the "ruines of our first parents",¹ endlessly erring? In an age in which religious feeling ran high it was inevitable that some should jump to the desperate conclusion that it came from God. Had not even the early humanists claimed that poetry was of divine origin? Hence the beginning of a line of sacred poets, all of them, however, minors.

Milton is not a religious poet. To define him so would be to ignore the extent of his purely personal achievement, the peculiarity of which consists in its adjustment of a profoundly sensuous genius to an austere intellect. But it *is* an adjustment. Milton stands out, head and shoulders, the champion of all the

¹ Milton: "Tractate on Education."

poets of compromise; Goliath-like and yet, for that very reason, condemned to be eternally remote from Israelites and Philistines alike. In him, more clearly than in Spenser, we may see the difficulty of the poet's position typified. As a believer in the classical world, he is as much taken up with the cares of style as any poet, (which accounts for Miltonic blank-verse's becoming quite as potent a drug as Pope's elegance on the eighteenth-century market). As a believer in the Christian world he has a duty to his fellows, to reveal that talent which 'tis death to hide—but they will not listen: to the end it remains lodged with him half-useless. As a believer in Reason he cannot rely on Faith alone: he must *justify* the ways of God to Man. But here, too, metaphysics and theology tend to cancel out one another. He does not know it, but the intellectual struggle makes him (in his own words) "marble with too much conceiving": he is caught, Laocoön-like, in the toils of too many contrarious forces. There he stands, himself a tower of strength, his superscription plain for all to see, and yet most of us continue to pass him by or creep beneath, not caring nor daring to look his god-like figure in the face. However distantly, he compels respect from all, admiration from most, understanding from a few, affection from none. Fallen on evil times, he feels—and because he knows himself baffled by it, resents—the coldness of his inevitable seclusion. Every word he writes comes just a little grudgingly, as if he were almost out of patience with his destiny.

"Paradise Lost", urged to its conclusion with all the moral earnestness and encyclopedic scholarship that human ingenuity is ever likely to be capable of, still falls short of achieving what it was intended to be—the national epic. In nobler ways and on a far grander scale it repeats the heroic fiasco of the "Faerie Queene". Somehow the elements of which it is compounded do not produce that perfect blend for which the country had so long yearned. It is the last fling of the greatest humanist of them all, the last serious effort to force a triumph by resort to foreign stratagem (to wit, Aristotle's "Receipt to make an

Epic Poem"). Milton's determination to succeed where all else had failed is more than praiseworthy, but when every allowance has been made for the magnificence of its language, the final verdict must surely be that the poem remains a colossal failure.

And Milton knew it. He refused to admit defeat. His choice of such a theme as that of "Samson Agonistes" was bound, sooner or later, to be forced upon him: he *had* to project his personal problem into verse. It was the solution which ultimately was to be worked out to its bitter end by the Romantics. Samson's agony is its author's: we stand awestruck, at a safe distance, watching the sinewy writhings of his gargantuan intellect; and yet, when it is all over, we cannot but regret that so huge a sacrifice should have been necessary.

II. AFTERMATH OF THE EPIC

Since this will be our final opportunity of considering the fate of epic-poetry in this country it may be as well to utter the appropriate last words before taking our leave of it. Its genesis, we saw, had been unlucky. The impulse which should have gone to its making had been repressed for centuries, to be sublimated finally in the poetic drama. After 1642 that outlet, too, was barred; and it was no accident that after the stirring interim of civil war poets should be moved to find new means of expressing the old urge, Dryden in his "Heroic" plays, Milton in the conventional epic form.

Milton, as is well known, was faced with apparent difficulties in choosing his subject. For a time he more than toyed with the idea of building his epic round the native Arthurian legend (traces of which are constantly peeping through the theological framework of "Paradise Lost"), and if he had indeed been guided to choose for his hero

Uther's son
Begirt with British and Armoric Knights,

the result might have been more matter and less art. There would necessarily have been more action, lively movement in place of the deathly stillness which in fact prevails.

"He who desires but acts not breeds pestilence," said Blake: a wild statement, perhaps, but not so far from truth. A man can only be healthily active in the social situation: therefore community life may be said to be the humus essential to epic growth. How far Milton was from being a good communalist needs no remarking. His was the Hamlet position, the born individualist. As time went on he became increasingly his own hero.

—Which inevitably recalls the hoary criticism that the real hero of "Paradise Lost" is Satan, the illicit child bred of some unconscious repression in the poet's mind. This is not strictly accurate. We should say, rather, that tradition will out, that even Milton's strict sense of decorum was not strong enough to hold down the throbbing energy of that high-vaunting strain first heard in "Beowulf". The sources of heroic energy were pagan not religious—and Milton, as Puritan, was well aware of the fact; therefore it could not appropriately be expended on the Deity. But it had to be voided on someone; and Satan, the sole candidate remaining (—Adam's solitariness is no less fatal to him as a character than the poet's), was invested with some of the powers which might have gone to make champions of an Arthur, a Lancelot or a Galahad. The result is terrific, of course, quite Dantesque, and if the alternative solution is not without its incongruities at least the attempt at heroism does not topple over into absurdity.

Dryden's does. Good mixer, man-of-the-world, honest-hearted and yeomanlike, Dryden was the only other poet big enough to have ventured the vain attempt, but he had succumbed like all the rest to the "ideal fallacy" of humanism. His world was too small, too restricted, too urbane to be of epic dimensions. Even so he felt the same desire—a great poem peopled with god-like creatures, a towering action,

couched in huge, dominating language. . . . But when it came to commanding such a language he knew himself to be impotent. His *Almanzor* tears passions to tatters and retires, baffled. Dryden's desire was lifelong, yet all his greater plans miscarried, remaining, on his own admission, "rude draughts".

Pope felt the same ambition. As a boy his first impulse was to write "Alcander Prince of Rhodes"; but years brought with them discretion. As a man he had to be content with a trivial mock-heroic, "Rape of the Lock", for his magnum opus. By that time Pope, unfortunately for himself, had ceased to believe in anything that would not easily conform to formula and rule. So far removed he was from living realities and his fellow-men that it was he, not they, who was doomed, "To draw Nutrition, propagate and rot". Like all the Augustans, he had become so identified with the superficial niceties of his age that he had lost what Keats called "Negative capability—that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason".¹ In the "Dunciad" he is reduced to cantankerous parody; but even the "Dunciad" is shot through with gleams of tentative heroism:

The freezing Tanais through a waste of snows. . . .
And universal darkness buries all. . . .

There was no place for darkness in Pope's upper room, however: every detail in it had to be sparkling clear, the "beauteous work of frost", illuminated only by the steady light of cold propriety. And yet, perhaps, we wrong him, thinking so. It is too easy to see in him only what he himself saw in others, —a "painted child of dirt that stinks and stings", who, "Half froth, half venom, spits himself abroad"; forgetting that his *saeva indignatio* was mainly self-consuming. Always at the back of his mind there must have been the consciousness that he was incapable of achieving the grand manner, that there was more to poetry than mere correctness. Maybe that was why,

¹ Keats: "Letters".

as a sop to his own disappointments, he undertook the translation of Homer; and why, in the Preface to the *Odyssey*, we find him writing, "Exact disposition, just thought, correct elocution, polished numbers, may have been found in a thousand, but this poetical fire, this *vivida vis animi*, in very few. . . ."

Even Pope, it seems, was not always content with his confinement in the Tower.

This continued failure to realize the epic form except in the most sporadic ways was inevitable in view of what had occurred. With the break-up of mediaeval Society—the substitution of fragmentary ideologies for an all-embracing Faith, individualism for communalism, humanism for religion, the existence of the epic in the post-Renaissance world had become as impossible as the mastodon's. What came afterwards was inevitably a host of lesser breeds. One of the consequences of the poet's inability to align themselves with the native tradition was that they were deprived of the background necessary for the creation of an authentic heroic poetry. Thus, by the time that the "Romantic Revival" was due we find Blake, Shelley, Keats compelled to resort to improvisations. The substance and machinery for a major work no longer existed: there was nothing but a few Roman remains—nothing on which the poet could rely except his own inventiveness. Each had to set to work anew—to think out his own personal mythology, a task exhausting to author and readers alike, for the new creations are always unfamiliar and never quite convincing.

Throughout the nineteenth century attempts at retrieval continue. There is Tennyson with his milk-and-water Idylls. There is Arnold, belated humanist, fondly hoping that he can succeed by a mere reference back to Vikings and warriors of Persia, taking an infinity of pains to produce such echoic, faded things as "Sohrab and Rustum" and "Balder Dead" (*ridiculus mus!*). There is far more of the lecture-room voice than the clang of battle-axes in his verse and the reason is plain: Arnold's only Valhalla was the Bodleian. He is worth mentioning, how-

ever, if only to illustrate the blind pertinacity of the poet's will-to-succeed by wrong methods.

The Classical, like the Heroick age
Is past; but Poetry may assume
That glorious name with Tarter and with Turk
With Goth or Arab, Sheik or Paladin
And not with Roman and with Greek alone.

—so at least the optimistic Landor proclaimed. The assumption was too facile. More was required than a change of subject or alternative derivations. The only ethical and social foundation from which the epic could have risen had been removed: it was like building on air.

The majority, however, could not see this. Either they would not, or they could not, come down to earth. For them it was the aery, unsubstantial pageant or nothing. Imagination, Invention, Idealism were their gods, and everything that was done in the name of such a trinity was justified in their eyes. So they went on, their mirage receding into ever-stranger regions.

III. RATIONALISM AND IDEALISM

The road to the epic was closed, then. What others might safely be explored? Were there other means of imaginary escape from the Tower?

Cut off from true religion and humanity, could not the poet take a hint from the philosopher? Both Bacon and Hobbes had attacked the use of the imagination in no uncertain terms; and had not Locke decreed that the only purpose of words for any man was "to make them stand as marks for the ideas within his mind"?¹ If Boileau were right, then Descartes had cut the throat of poetry. History, Classical and Mediaeval alike, was no better than a chaotic nightmare from which the new science was at last beginning to rouse order and sanity. If it were to

¹ *Essay on the Human Understanding*, III, Chaps. 1, 2.

justify its existence at all, poetry must surely reflect an equal order and sanity. It, too, must adopt a "method". It must be intellectual or perish.

Unfortunately the poet soon discovered that he had neither the aptitude nor the training necessary to become a philosopher. He had cleared away the antique lumber, but he was still compelled to rely on others, the original thinkers, for his material. And the final subtleties of philosophy were in no way translatable into poetry—the terminologies were too disparate, he found. Profundities became platitudes, dialectic could only be foreshortened into "wit"; and since obscurity must be avoided at all costs he found himself being led farther and farther into arid wastes of abstraction.

This attempt to make poetry join forces with philosophy was symptomatic of the eighteenth century's effort to find that unity-in-diversity which had been lost and to appeal, however indiscriminately, to as many aspects of knowledge as possible in order to bolster the inadequacy of the spiritual ideal. In much the same way we find, throughout the century, a widespread desire to make the moral correspond exactly with the physical order, the equation of the scientific world with the religious. Whereas formerly the problems of human nature had been regarded from the angle of the divine, they were now studied chiefly from utilitarian or experimental points of view, without relation to fundamental issues. The rationalism of Descartes (translated into the literary sphere by his ablest apostle Fontenelle) pretended to furnish men with a perfect, self-sufficing wisdom which dispensed with the need for faith or revelation. Briefly, the "motives of human life had become anthropocentric instead of theocentric".¹

This was a development of humanism far more dangerous than any hitherto known to the schools. Renaissance and Reformation had exalted the grandeur of the human personality, but in doing so had left it isolated. The seventeenth and

¹ Cf. J. Maritain: *The True Humanism*. P. 19.

eighteenth centuries proceeded to justify that isolation in the name of Reason, claiming for the intellect absolute immanence and autonomy. In the world of mind no external intervention was either necessary or desirable: Man was to be his own authority and to provide his own justification.

The poets' readiness to withdraw into private citadels of their own making was but one instance of this perverted confidence. In so doing they had thrown away the better part of inspiration, dividing their souls between two obediences. To quote Maritain again:

We are face to face with a mechanical dichotomy which has taken the place of an organic subordination. The conception of man of mediaeval Christendom has been cut in twain: on one side there is the purely natural man, who has no other need than that of his reason to be perfect, wise, good and inherit the earth; and on the other, there is a celestial envelope, his *believing double*, who is assiduous at worship and who prays to the Christian God, who surrounds and upholds with the soft down of grace this purely natural man and renders him capable of gaining heaven. . . . Thus, by a sagacious division of labour unforeseen by the Gospel, the Christian will be able to serve two masters at once. God for heaven and Mammon for this earth.¹

In other words the Miltonic aim was reversed and the poet set out to justify the ways of Man to God.

Since every creed except the rational had been challenged, it was more or less inevitable that poetry should seek to ape philosophy. Unfortunately the two did not mix. The ideal world of a Galileo or a Descartes was a world of mathematical values: the attempt to clothe it in the flesh and blood of poetical inspiration was doomed to failure. The tendency of seventeenth and eighteenth-century thought was to deny not only

¹ Op. cit., 14.

the value of emotion but the substantial reality of things. Puritanism had always wished to deny the physical side of human existence, but the scientific attitude went further: it left the poet with a world denatured and dehumanized. There was little or nothing to which he could put a name. The attempt to follow the example of the philosophers in order to express the absolute was foredoomed, as futile as Johnson's rejoinder to Berkeley—"I refute him thus!"

Even though rationalism could not provide the necessary pabulum of poetry, however, the confidence in its methods was far from being without consequences in eighteenth-century literature. The fact that rules of versification were so cut-and-dried, the fact that the whole sphere of human experience was capable of being so neatly card-indexed, was an open invitation to complacent writers. A modicum of common sense, a smattering of idealism plus a conventionalized style (—Miltonic tricks or slick Popery) and the result, surely, would be . . . poetry. Never had the prospects of literary success seemed more obvious and certain.

The spate of mediocrity which followed, we know. If this is what Housman had in mind when he spoke of "sham poetry, a counterfeit deliberately manufactured and offered as a substitute",¹ then we agree with him in condemning roundly most of what happened in the whole period between Milton and Wordsworth. We must not, on that account, forget the undoubted achievements of the true Augustans nor delude ourselves by thinking that Romanticism was a better or more final exit from the spiritual impasse: it was, in fact, only an exciting alternative. The choice between Classicism and Romanticism is not so simple that it can be decided by any ordinary judgment or preference. What is necessary is a thorough understanding of the profound difficulties under which the poets were now labouring and which produced such a decline in their fortunes.

¹ *The Name and Nature of Poetry.*

The decline is demonstrable. Shakespeare . . . Milton . . . Dryden . . . Pope . . . and then the lesser "Dunciad" fry—Eagle, buzzard, magpie, sparrow . . . insects. From greatness to littleness, a sort of geometric progression in the Muse's misfortune. The impetus of the Renaissance had no sooner spent itself than a kind of Law of Diminishing Returns set in. In little more than a century the all-seeing sun of Shakespeare came to be focused in a narrow polished lens, "fixt as in frost" as Pope himself admitted. "Lear" had shrivelled to an epigram. At this rate, poetry seemed doomed to certain and speedy extinction.

Why?

Surely we have put our finger on some of the causes already. The break with tradition had been too violent, too sudden. It left men helpless. In this country the dismissal of mediæval authority was accomplished far more quickly than on the Continent; too quickly for it to escape the nemesis of serious after-effects. The control of Society, which for centuries had been vested in the Church (not always benevolent but invariably catholic) had been taken over by a lay despotism, but this transference of authority had occurred without any appreciable interval of transition. Reliance on God had suddenly become reliance on individual freedom; and the individual was caught unprepared, unready to accept such onus. Without warning he was without anchor, alone. Poetry, like life, had become, in every sense of the word, disorganized.

In those countries where the Renaissance came earlier the cultural anti-climax was not so marked. In Italy, for example, more than four centuries separate Giotto from Tiepolo: there was time in such a transition for assimilation and adjustment. In England the same distance was traversed in less than a lifetime. Sixty years between the last of the Moralities and Richard Crashaw!—between the old Tudor style and the wildest extravagances of Seicento baroque. Circumstance certainly did not temper the wind to the shorn poet in this country.

The full blast of social, spiritual and economic change was concentrated into so short a space that tradition was blown into shreds.

All the same, it is worth reminding ourselves that though the effects of Renaissance and Reformation were so violent and cataclysmic in this country they could not have been indefinitely postponed. The insidious nature of the changes were felt sooner or later in all countries and in every sphere of human activity. A survey of Western civilization confirms the opinion that, "there was, in fact, no vital art in Europe following the break-up of the mediaeval world."¹

There *was* no exit through the intellect. Keats was not the first to find to his cost that "Philosophy will clip an angel's wing". The god-like Reason, which the poet had set himself to worship, turned out, on closer inspection, to be a stone-faced Janus, incapable of giving an answer either way.

IV. TOWARDS ROMANTICISM

There was still the second alternative—introspection. Quite apart from his efforts to reduce art to an intellectual method and to find in form a perfect end, the poet had not been entirely idle. Other escapist ventures had been essayed.

We have already noted that, despite its outward appearance of calm, strange forces were stirring under the spit-and-polish surface of Augustanism. Forces of discontent. The influence of Dryden's maturer work has often been held responsible for the narrow ideal of eighteenth-century "correctness", but it was Dryden's restless intellect (everything by starts and nothing long) which first came near to hitting upon a solution. He foresaw, not too clearly (but too soon) that unless some way out of the corner into which the poet had been forced could be found, the result would be inanity. He recognized the danger and in his critical writings did what he could to announce it.

¹ William Johnston: *Creative Art in England*. P. 18.

His verse reveals no signs of it, of course: he was still too closely hedged in by the last outcroppings of the Renaissance to do anything to save himself. But though he could not himself escape, or even bring himself to attempt a breakthrough, he did not hesitate to offer advice as to how it might be done. Between Dryden's verse and Dryden's criticism there is the same difference as between practice and theory.

What, then, was the gist of this theory? Nothing less than the ultimate battle-cry of Romanticism: "Back to Nature". True, for Dryden "to be like Nature is to be set above it"; it must always be "Nature wrought up to a higher pitch"! He is very far from being clear as to the nature of Nature: he is still in the stage of believing that the term may involve everything or anything, Man-made or God-evolved. On the whole, his humanist nurture and environment persuaded him that Nature was in need of improvement and that the good poet's aim was the classical one of giving "the most common and natural things a fabulous Gloss, to render them more Admirable and heighten Truth".¹ The tendency of the eighteenth century was to reverse that decision, gradually shifting the emphasis from *natura naturata* to *natura naturans*. Dryden is a whole world away from Rousseau or Wordsworth, but it is worth remembering that he gave the first hint of the new attitude.

"Back to Nature." With his sure, shrewd humour Professor Nichol Smith has remarked that this slogan has been proclaimed by every new movement in English poetry. Still, the words are far from meaningless. If the appeal had been the more universal cry of "Back to the land", the meaning might have been more wholesome and less partial than it was. It was, however, a step in the right direction.

Confinement in the Tower was becoming more and more intolerable; besides, the very foundations had begun to crumble. There was only one thing to be done: the poet must burst the barriers and try to get back—get back to people and to things.

¹ *Of Dramatic Poesy* (ed. W. P. Ker. Pp. 100, 102).

Unfortunately, a return to Nature was by no means as simple as it sounded. More than one wall of convention had to be broken down before an exit to reality could be forced and unrestricted communion occur once more. Solitary confinement had turned the poet into something of an eccentric: being natural turned out to be one of the most difficult things in the world, most uncomfortable, too, and dangerous. Far easier to do what most of them did—remain snugly ensconced and go on playing with words, ideas, sentiments—inhabiting a private world.

There were always some, however, who ventured cautiously out, taking a step or two along the path to reality before retreating hastily to the safety of their cells.

I have found out a gift for my fair;
I have found where the wood-pigeons breed

quavers Shenstone; and calls his poem, symbolically, "Hope." It was not long before "Nature" became the cult of eighteenth-century men-about-town, each half-amused, half-overawed at his own temerity in daring to snuff fresh air again and stoop to examine the commonplace. There was at first more of the childish than the child-like in this return to simplicity; the amazement of a connoisseur who is suddenly perturbed by the realization of an unsuspected ignorance. Of course, they did not go so far as openly to admit as much. Enthusiasm of any kind was looked upon almost as a fault, offensive to the rules of decorum; therefore they could not immediately surrender themselves to wonder. Did not Reason still prompt them that the outer world was no better than an illusion, if not a delusion: that the only ultimate reality was to be found, not in a deceptive Nature, but in the mind? Was it not laid down in Bishop Berkeley's so-much admired *Principles of Human Knowledge*:

In a word, all the choir of heaven and furniture of earth—
all those bodies which compose the mighty frame of the
world—have not any substance without a mind; their *esse*

is to be perceived or known and consequently, so long as they are not actually perceived by me or do not exist in my mind or that of any other created spirit, they must either have no existence at all, or else subsist in the mind of some eternal spirit. . . . We hold indeed the objects of sense to be nothing else but ideas which cannot exist unperceived.

What else could this mean if not that idealism and realism were one and the same? Was the poet not justified, then, in confining himself to the sphere of the imagination or, better still, to those regions of Thought which the good bishop had claimed to be "common sense?" Was it not wiser to remain inside the Tower after all?

On the other hand, even Berkeley had not denied the need and meaning of experience. . . . And since the mind began from nothing, from scratch (a point upon which Locke had been *most* explicit), how else could it grow unless by accretion of the senses, by perception? Surely it was incumbent upon the poet to gain as much first-hand evidence as he could?

It was all very confusing. . . .

To state the problem in terms such as these is not to suggest that the early eighteenth-century writers allowed themselves to be governed by the expert thinkers. The conflict of Reason and Emotion, each jockeying for a position of control, would obviously have resolved itself in the way it did without reference to the findings of the dialecticians; yet though Poetry and Philosophy were so insulate, both moved in ways which were akin. What became of the one may therefore be taken as indicative of the fate of the other. Rationalism bred Idealism and Idealism bred Scepticism which in turn brought philosophy to a *reductio ad absurdum* so complete and final that it was left with no alternative but to begin all over again from fresh premises.

Intellect had failed. In the end it was seen that ideas were, in themselves inert, powerless. Reason was no more than an

instrument, a means, not the end as had been supposed. It was not enough to classify the content or extent of human knowledge: what mattered was the nature of the motives prompting experience which involved a thorough revaluation of the emotional factor. Even Hume had been compelled to admit that "experimental reasoning itself is nothing but a species of instinct that acts in us unknown to ourselves",¹—a conclusion that was further clarified and clinched in Hutcheson's blunt statement that "no reason can excite to action . . . no end can be proposed without some instinct or affection".² Long before Rousseau came forward with his paradoxical attack upon the uses of intellect Englishmen had begun to work round to the realization that human beings did not and could not conduct themselves according to the pure, cold light of Reason alone.

"*Cogito ergo sum*" was being discarded in favour of a newer conviction: "*je sens, donc je suis*."

The discovery was at once shocking and exciting. The existence of dark, unknown, possibly unknowable and limitless sources of human energy, gave a new lease of life to poetic endeavour. "Back to Nature!"—the cry began to be taken up now with growing confidence. Sensibility, as opposed to sense, came into its own. Enter the Man of Feeling. Now that Renaissance orthodoxy and post-Renaissance rationalism had both proved themselves to be dead-letters, the poet was free at last, (if he wished) to throw off the shackles of the old classical humanism.

Thus, at the very end of a long life we find such an author as Edward Young announcing as his considered opinion that, "An Original may be said to be of a *vegetable* nature; it rises spontaneously from the vital root of genius; it *grows*, it is not made: Imitations are often a sort of *manufacture* wrought up by those mechanics, *art* and *labour*, out of pre-existent materials not their own", and again: "Genius can set us right in Com-

¹ *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*. Sect. IX.

² *Illustration upon the Moral Sense*. Sect. X.

position without the rules of the learned, as conscience sets us right in life without the laws of the land . . . many a genius probably there has been which could neither write nor read." These *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759) were Young's last will and testament to the coming generation, or rather a kind of death-bed repentance, for his own attempts at kicking off the traces had been half-hearted at best: the notorious *Night Thoughts* were filled with nothing much better than a lachrymose self-pity. As with Dryden, so with Young, it is a case of "Do as I say, not as I do".

At long last the poet was beginning to reclaim some of the freedom which Spenser had unwittingly mortgaged aforetime. With this difference, however, that he was still not free of himself. He might reclaim his freedom: he could not so easily redeem it. The saving grace of the mediaeval poets had always been their lack of self-awareness: the implicit reliance on an attitude which looked for creation to occur through fellowship, emanating from God. As Maritain puts it, "It was on the side of deliberate and express reflection that this self-consciousness was lacking . . . they *lived* these things, they were not *interested* in them, and . . . held it of little use to speak of them." The later eighteenth-century poets, on the contrary, disclaimed all Necessity, thought fit to find the end and the beginning in their own "originality". They were in no sense traditionalists: they would not, even if it had occurred to them, have seen any meaning in the statement that the individual is foolish, the species wise. All they were capable of desiring was to be themselves.

Such the beginning of the modern irresponsibility.

To call it, as most do, a Romantic Revival, is to miss half its main meaning. That there *was* a "movement" and that it produced the romantic mind (or, rather, two types of romantic mind) is not to be disputed; but this consequence should be regarded as being no more than incidental. Its importance lies in the fact that it was, above all else, an effort to *get back*, to pick

up the loose threads at the point where they had been left broken in the sixteenth century. However unconsciously, poetry was being driven back to something like its original position. The universal slogan might well have been, "Back to the People!" *À bas la Bastille!*—the Tower was down at last. What was not realized was that the poet remained his own prisoner.

Still, the cry was "Back to Nature".

Inevitably, the first steps were tentative, timid. Gray at Gordale Scar ("I stay'd there (not without shuddering) *a quarter of an hour*") is typical. To-day it would be interesting and instructive to know the reactions of raw-kneed Youth Hostellers from Bradford to such confessions as these. Our more hard-boiled outlook tends to make us faintly derisive of sensibility so old-maidish as this, yet it was sincerely intended; and if Gray *does* seem rather to dither (like a convalescent trying out his legs for the first time after a long, debilitating illness), it is only fair to recall the equal bewilderment of Marvell stumbling in his sunlit seventeenth-century garden. The Augustans' rediscovery of the delights of English landscape and the gentlemanly revival of an interest in gardening were very far from concealing a revolutionary intent: certainly they were very far from returning society to the bedrock attitude of the peasantry; but they gave a preliminary hint of the direction in which men's minds were turning. Herrick, good countryman that he was in many ways, ate his heart out in the rural exile of his seventeenth-century parsonage, for ever railing at "dull Devonshire". For him Dartmoor's a prison. How different the mentality of a Stukeley, a Hervey or a Gilbert White, each so happy in his little earthly paradise that he must tell all his friends in town how much they are missing!

If these earlier explorers of the eighteenth-century countryside did not succeed in getting very far, there were others whose pioneering now seems to have been still more purblind. The desire to "get back", to effect a realignment with the original tradition, was so dim that many writers deemed that it would

be enough if they imitated the outward marks of mediaevalism. Now that Time had mellowed them sufficiently, the remains of monasteries were at last fit to be regarded as something better than dilapidated relics of an uncouth age: indeed, was there not something infinitely attractive about them—picturesque? “Gothick” became the craze. Mimicry of the Middle Ages became the hobby-horse of *blasé* intellectuals, eager for new aesthetic thrills. No scene was quite complete without its dread ruin—

The lone heath, or some time-hallowed pile.

So thirsting they were for emotional satisfaction that they must titillate their fancies by building ruins of their own, make-belief cloisters round their trim lawns—surprise views (the broken chancel at the end of box-tree avenues)—Horace Walpole’s house at Strawberry Hill, amusing toy (absurd, of course, but somehow pleasing). As Gray projected his secret “horror” into mountain landscape, endowing Nature with a sentient life of its own, so the enthusiasts of mock-Gothic sought to find therein outlets for ancestral repressions. Forces of history were beginning to reassert themselves: as though the race-psychology were suddenly aware of a hankering for something that had long remained suppressed.

There were, of course, more serious students of the Middle Ages—the Wharton family, for instance, and the philologist Tyrwhitt, unearther of Chaucer; but for every one of these there were a thousand who dabbled fondly with the idea of a factitious return to mediaevalism. Had they been pressed, they would have passed it off as mere whimsy, but it was always something more than that, fundamental in ways they could never explain. “Ossian” might be a criminal fake, its author Macpherson a forger (—“A ruffian, sir!” said Dr. Johnson), but it supplied a need:

A tale of the times of old! The deeds of days of other
years! The murmur of thy streams, O Lora! brings back
the memory of the past. . . .

It was no accident, either, which induced that *enfant terrible*, Chatterton, to disguise himself in such outlandish garb. Chatterton, unluckiest, best of tricksters.—Is anything in our literary history quite so pathetic as the story of this boy, “beerynge uponne hys backe” the dead-weight of mediaeval mummary until it broke him? His Rowley poems were no nearer to being the genuine article than Walpole’s self-publicized monstrosity of a house; but they had certain intrinsic beauties—which renders more pitiable the outcry at the discovery of their cloaked deception. Most of their cherished quaintness they owed to skilful plagiarism of Spenser (himself an archaist “forst to fayne”): they were a counterfeit of a counterfeit. We know well enough that anything even faintly resembling a sham was like a red flag to that old bull, Dr. Johnson; and yet, though he *was* hopelessly biased, he spoke no less than the truth when he snorted, “In Chatterton there is nothing but the resolution to say again what has once been said.” That is what makes Chatterton’s tragedy so pathetic—the unnecessary waste of fine spirit working to no end—but it does not rob it of his wan significance. Hogg, Mickle, Coleridge, Keats and many another were profoundly sensitive to the attractions of conscious archaism. It was wilful self-deception, the escapist act—like opium-eating, only not so effective. The drug at least induced that luxurious state of reverie in which the dreamer could conjure up romance, whereàs archaism tended too often to lure him into absurdity. It was not long before both Coleridge and Keats realized the cul-de-sac into which it was leading them and tried other means. Archaism was too obviously a dead-end: but the mere fact that so many tried it is indicative of the lurking desire to recapture the original mannerisms, if not the manners, of yesteryears.

But archaism was only one among many signs that eighteenth-century man was becoming increasingly dissatisfied. He was so *tired* of what was calm and lucid and always superficial: for sheer boredom he longed for what was restless, dark, sensational.

Never in its history had English poetry been turned out with such high finish, sparkling like cut-glass, smooth, polished like finest porcelain: and yet brittle, little, a useless ornament. He was tired of good manners, of pretty speaking that somehow missed his real meaning, of explanations in which nothing was explained; tired of mental precision, of perspectives in which everything was so obviously and finally arranged. He was sick of decency.

No wonder that a revulsion should have occurred. For mind-weary men the temptation to drift off into the unknowable was only too strong. "O for a life of sensations rather than of thoughts!" cries Keats; and Heine, "Men cannot now be put off with promissory notes upon Heaven; they now claim as their inalienable birthright the enjoyment of this earth."¹ In Germany, only more resolutely, there was a similar movement to return poetry to its pre-Reformation status. Exemplary remains of mediaeval folk-song (such as the "Boy's Wonder Horn") were taken as text-books of a new school bent on relearning the first essentials of national tradition. In England the new freedom showed itself more diffidently and never defined itself except in individuals. It never established a programme or a school. "Back to Nature"—the glib phrase was capable of an infinity of variant readings. Only one thing was common to all, the refusal to admit anything except the self-sufficiency of human nature.

Such the Romantic Delusion.

So intoxicating was the fresh air after the atmosphere of the Tower, the light so blinding, that the majority of poets made no further progress towards the real goal. They followed only the ideal prompting of their particular desires. They took the path that led into the mists of Nowhere and one by one (for each was alone) they were lost. Irresponsibles.

This is the first type of the Romantic mind.

Beckford was perhaps the first. Beckford—so tender-hearted

¹ *Die Romantische Schule.*

he could not kill a fly: ¹ yet he forgot his seven bastards and the wretches who slaved to make his fortunes in West Indian plantations—retired (for want of anything better to do) into luxurious Eastern fantasies, into a make-belief second-existence as Vathek, “Caliph of the race of the Abassides, the son of Montassem, and the grandson of Haroun-al-Raschid”. It might seem that Beckford’s was the extreme case, that he had reached the utmost limits of wishful thinking; but many who came after fared farther and no better. They began full of wild hope and promise and ended in despondency and madness. Blake did a disappearing trick, vanishing into mysticism. Keats swooned. Coleridge got lost in his own fuddled “counterfeit infinity”. ² The seraph Shelley, most ineffectual of angels, was taken up into a cloud or

Went into the deserts of dim sleep

as did so many of the lesser lights.

The poets’ long immurement was not without its after-effects, for when they were free at last the majority squandered their opportunity in riotous living. Libertines, they still mistook the shadow for the reality. Passionate in self-immolation they dashed out their headstrong souls against the sun, like moths at a candle. They had their moments, but their crowded hour was quickly over. Their spirits flared—we are still amazed at the intensity of their celluloid brilliance—but they were not guiding lights: rather will-o’-the-wisps whose example only served to lure others from the hard and narrow path.

Which led only one way—to the earth. It was the others, the plodders who came nearer to making the return. The Crabbes, the Burns, the Wordsworths, the Clares; the dull fellows rather than the shining ones. They were not quite so entirely taken up with themselves: they tried, if not always, at

¹ Cf. his *Journal*: 31st July, 1780, “I could not find in my heart to destroy their felicity.”

² *Opium Jottings*.

least at times, to get down to things, to be objective. And in so doing they took on, willy-nilly, some of the characteristics *and* the faults of the forgotten peasant—heaviness, rough-and-readiness, simplicity of motive, constancy and seriousness of purpose, durability. They trudged rather than soared. They were often long-winded, uneven, rarely at their best.

This is the second type of Romantic mind.

The difference between the second and the first is tantamount to that between positive and negative. The distinction is not absolute, of course, but for practical purposes the formula will serve. It gives us, on the one hand, Wordsworth, Coleridge on the other: Clare *vis-à-vis* of Darley; and—though by their time the outline is more blurred—Browning as opposed to Tennyson.

It is a real distinction. Wordsworth's road did not go all the way yet it led him to the grey screes of Greenhead Ghyll, to a bleak but homely farmstead: Coleridge's was only the path to Xanadu, Tennyson's to the land of the Lotos-eaters. The one was the path of self-denial, the other of self-destruction.

If the fateful difference is not made adequately clear in this, perhaps we can better convince ourselves of its reality by considering a case in point. Given a theme, how can the distinction between the "positive" and the "negative" treatment of it be demonstrated?

Make a test. Take the so-much-discussed and admired "To a Skylark" by Shelley and compare it with another poem of a same title, not (as usual) Wordsworth's, but one by an actual peasant, James Hogg. Subject both to the same rigorous scrutiny. The usual view would be that Shelley's is infinitely the superior (that is, it manifests a far greater individual genius), but that is beside our present purpose. For the moment we are trying to use the physician's eye. If we are to examine both as specimens in poetic evolution we need to take the long view. If, in the pale beauty of one we spy the hectic spot which marks incipient disease we must, whatever our personal feelings

may be, decide that the rude health of the other is ultimately to be preferred. Ours is the surgeon's callousness.

Proceed, then, with the brief diagnosis.

From the whole of Shelley's poem only one hard fact emerges. It is contained in the second line. His skylark is not alone in being a scorner of the ground, nor is it the only one to lose itself in the sky. The song is sustained, irrepressible, yes—it trembles in his throat as violently as the bird's; but what else is it but the expression of a vast unfulfilment? That way madness lies. It is the Death-Wish striving to become articulate.

Hogg's verses are far more pedestrian. His lyricism is too humble to aspire: it is, if you like, clod-footed,

Thy lay is in heaven, thy love is on earth,

—but in its lesser way it is the more satisfying. At any rate it does not blow us up with air to leave us at the apex without wings of our own. Hogg's eye, like Shelley's, was attracted by the sky-circler, but he did not allow his private feeling to be distracted into useless imaginings. Hogg's inspiration, then, is disciplined. Shelley's is not. Hogg's poem derived from generations of Lowland folk-song, and whether or not he had Alan Ramsay in mind—

“The larks shall sing me hame in my ain country,”

—he was content to be guided by them when he wrote it. Shelley's genius, on the contrary, is all too obviously unprecedented. The fact that Hogg's sure sense was instinctive must not be put to his personal account—it does not make his poem better than Shelley's—but the fact remains that it was wiser. Even though they did not get him very far, his ploddings covered some of the ground towards the ultimate objective. Shelley's was an Icarus flight.

Hold fast, then, to that which is good. Follow the plodders! What progress had they made before the eighteenth century came to its close? Very little. At first sight it might not be

thought that the affected Miltonism of a Thomson (still less a Richard Jago¹ or a William Somerville²) represented any significant move at all. It is difficult to imagine the feeling of relief with which "The Seasons" was greeted by the reading public. It came like a cool shower after the parched dog-days. The critics might remain obdurate against its charms ("filling the ear more than the mind," said Dr. Johnson—"a vicious style," said Wordsworth), but the majority of ordinary people swallowed it greedily, diction and all. Here at last was the kind of poetry they had been waiting for—or something like it; something after their own heart. As a boy, Clare tramped twenty miles to purchase a copy, found the bookseller's shut and made a second journey, spending eighteen-pence (more than a whole day's earnings) which he had somehow contrived to wheedle out of his pauper father.

If "The Seasons" seemed to promise a return to objectivity, it was a promise which Thomson failed to fulfil in his later work. Hazlitt did him more than justice when he asserted that "he describes not to the eye alone, but to the other senses, and to the whole man. He puts his heart into his subject, writes as he feels, and humanizes whatever he touches." Nevertheless, these idealized landscapes were a beginning, even though their message was not much more than the old one about God making the country and Man the town. The ever-impeccable Goldsmith and the dry couplets of the reverend Crabbe were moving in the same direction, too.

Nor should we forget the part played by the clergy in reviving the country tradition (—the same clergy which suppressed the village orchestra!)—Philips' "Cyder" (1708), Dyer's "Grongar Hill" (1726), White's "Selborne", Crabbe's "Parish Register", Hurdis' "Favourite Village" . . . the much later Hawker resurrecting the folk-lore of Cornwall, excavating Morwenna's well,

¹ Author of "Edgehill or The Rural Prospect Delineated and Moralized" (Dodsley, 1767).

² Author of "The Chase, a Poem: to which is added Hobbino! or The Rural Games" (1767).

reverting to Catholicism . . . and Barnes with his Wessex "wort-lore" and "speech-craft". Their contribution was by no means negligible. By 1750 rural rides and rural musings had become almost fashionable. Rusticity was acceptable, almost a virtue.

Usually a sham rusticity. Consider that gilder of lilies, Hurdis:

Now sends the garden all its glories forth
With many a nodding pyramid of flowers;
Or pale or purple leaved her varnished leaf
The lilac decks. Laburnum at her side
Weeps gold, sweet mourner! From behind appears
And tosses high in air her frothy globes
Her unsubstantial roses, light as foam
Of new milk bubbling in a cowherd's pail
The beauteous guelder shrub . . .¹

Frothy is right. These are paper flowers. See how the rascal *pretends*!—all the old mannerisms ("sweet mourner" forsooth!), *mots justes* and pretty style—the same desire to add a "fabulous Gloss". . . . If this be not Dryden's "Nature wrought up to a higher pitch", what is? Hurdis may keep up the masquerade as long as he pleases: he is still the dilettante, the don with an eye for landscape; he knows nothing of the true countryman's wise passiveness.

Cowper is more genuine:

Still hungering, penniless and far from home
I fed on scarlet lips and stony haws
Or blushing crabs or berries that emboss
The bramble, black as jet . . .²

but compare him with an actual peasant poet;

The ash tree swells, its buds as black as jet
The swallow glistens in its gay palm bloom
Studded with golden dust, where earliest come

¹ "The Favourite Village."

² "The Task."

The solitary wild bees that survive
 Their trance and keep their feeble songs alive.
 The rifted elm from cloathing Spring receives
 Its hop-like, pale forerunners of the leaves,
 And tasselled catkins on the hazels cling . . .¹

and see how much he has still to learn. Though Cowper gains by a return to honest simplicity, he lacks that close observation and continuous experience-at-first-hand which foster the objective mind. He has not become so natural as to forget himself: he still strives (though not so obviously) for effect. For Cowper Nature has become more than a pose: it begins to show itself as a rudimentary philosophy, trite, no doubt—a philosophy that loses itself in floods of self-pity and soft sentiment, but nevertheless one which has become a part of him.

Cowper's philosophy of Nature was essentially anthropomorphic. In his peculiar way he came to realize what Rousseau had already announced with greater conviction, the loveliness of men and creatures and things—and their essential weakness. Nature was not enough. . . . He was not made of such stern stuff as Wordsworth was, believing that revelation could come through sheer effort, that the burden of the mystery would be finally removed by the ability to "see into the life of *things*". He took refuge, rather, in religious mania.

Cowper *was* willing, however, to step down and mingle with the meanest: his hymns prove his partial success in effecting that common touch which had so long been lacking. But it was not given him to maintain it. Always he felt that haunting difference in himself, the cursed isolation:

I was a stricken deer that left the herd
 Long since. . . .

(—in 1578 to be precise).

That which was plain and simple in Cowper's verse in Wordsworth becomes austere. What was shallow is made

¹ From "The Pleasures of Spring". Cf. Appendix.

profound. What was tremulous is now sonorous in confidence. What was weak becomes strong. The advance is tremendous, yet the final result, transcendent as it is, remains slightly inhuman: certainly it is no nearer bringing poetry back to earth. If he had disciplined himself to pursue his first intention "to chuse incidents and situations from common life and to relate or describe them throughout as far as possible in a selection of language really used by men", the end might have been happier. In his first attitude—the 1798 mood—he was not entirely devoid of one of the virtues necessary for success—humility: but it did not last. Like all the others he allowed himself to become wrapped up in his own importance as the sole, indispensable interpreter of Nature. He became Sir Oracle. His *magnum opus* turned out to be, not the liberal review of common life as promised in the preface to the "Lyrical Ballads" but "The Recluse" . . .

If Wordsworth had been a better mixer, less self-sufficing it might have been otherwise, or if he had met more often with leech-gatherers . . . been compelled to earn his living. . . . Drinkwater was right: "Wordsworth's poetry is the harvest of solitude."¹ But solitude breeds egotism, a sin; and the wages of sin is Death.

How near Wordsworth came to succeeding where all else failed he himself never suspected: or if he did, the thought afforded him no pleasure. He had everything which makes for popularity (using that word in its best sense), yet he refused to avail himself of the opportunity. Several of the "Lyrical Ballads" appeared as penny broadsheets and were hawked about the towns by ballad-mongers: "We are Seven" sold like hot cakes among the Northamptonshire villagers; but Wordsworth knew nothing of it . . . and cared less. He had succeeded in *getting back*, but when the moment of final reunion came he could not realize it. It seemed he had only to cross one threshold more in order to regain the universal sympathy. Instead,

¹ *Outline of Literature.*

he allowed himself to become engrossed in his own transcendentalism—he turned away. . . . Simple folk continued to admire, but they ceased to understand him; nor could they help regretting what Clare very rightly called, “Wordsworth’s affected godliness”. His last state was far worse than his first: he had become a stranger after all.

In 1800 “literature” and “folk-poetry” were nearer to being reconciled than at any time since the Renaissance. The determination to find in Nature the final justification of human existence succeeded indirectly in appealing once more to the sympathies of Everyman regardless of intellect or class; but only intermittently. To achieve this much, poetry had been compelled to humble itself in many ways, doff the cracked armour of the Ancients, jettison its load of intellect, go roughshod . . . but it could not bring itself to make the final abnegation—deny its self. In France the Revolution, in England Paine and Godwin, proclaimed from passionate roof-tops not only the Rights of Man but his infallibility. Democracy (himself writ large) was to be the common man’s new God. With “Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité” so stirring men’s hearts it was only natural that poetry should try to line up with the multitudes, and that in doing so its voice should take on the assured ring of authority. It regained some of the old values, but abounding confidence in humanity was not to prove a satisfying basis for faith. And though he had succeeded in evacuating his Tower, the poet had only exchanged it for a position alongside the reformers on the roof-top. Or, worse, he was left shelterless and retired into his shell like a hurt snail.

The opportunity of at least a partial reconciliation between poet and people had been missed: there was only a moment of fleeting recognition; and the nineteenth century saw the whole process of estrangement repeated. Far from becoming an organ of the national life, poetry remained the exclusive property of an intellectual class; a class which tended more and more to become alienated from the living body of the

people. "Classicism" had been led astray by the tenuous ideal of intellectual form, "Romanticism" by that emotional individualism: inadequate, both. Neither constituted the whole truth—any more than Art or Science could separately supply the needs of an integral education. At best they were but the specialized expression of human attitudes. Their appeal, therefore, was limited. Both were non-social and at times anti-social: neither made any real progress in "getting across" to the multitudes, though as time went on the poet felt his responsibilities in that direction more keenly. In a word, poetry had got back to Nature without getting back to earth.

If neither the clear highroad of Classicism, nor the dark and sinister paths of Romanticism could lead the poet back to the people, what then? He had explored both. There seemed to be no other way.

Actually there was, but it was one along which conditions of modern society did not permit him to get very far . . .

CHAPTER VI

THE PEASANTS' REVOLT

"THE Rights of Man"—"*je sens, donc je suis*"—"Return to Nature"—an age which placed its confidence in these and kindred slogans was bound, sooner or later, to admit that poetry might be found in huts where poor men lie. Both intellect and culture seemed to have proved themselves inept: why, then, should the forces of ignorance not be given their chance?

This view eventually extended to the sphere of literary theory. Thus we find a writer in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, instancing the achievements of Chatterton, Burns, Bloomfield, Drew, Clare and Kirke White, being so bold as to declare that

The aspirations of true genius . . . have not been dependent upon the advantages of education or the light of learning . . . Her native and indigenous creatures of fancy, the teeming images of a mind *finely oppressed* by a generous enthusiasm, will burst forth *in spite of the rustic garb and the inauspicious circumstances which, perchance, environ and obscure it.*¹

Perchance! It was a comfortable belief. But, to the early nineteenth-century mood it seemed that poet and peasant had much in common. The spirit of the age was such as to encourage the labouring hind in the fond hope that he might become the popular champion, succeeding where others had failed in restoring minstrelsy to the people. What he did not realize was that the gap between Poetry and Society could only be bridged by his entering the lists of LITERATURE—and that thereby his candidature was compromised from the start. Folk-song could not survive the printed page. The rustic singer had to

¹ *Remarks on the Spontaneous Display of Native Genius*, by E. P. (Jan. 1821). Italics mine.

deny his nature, competing with the official poets on their own ground.

Still, the moment seemed opportune. The attempt was made. The farmer's boy would be a bard. . . .

Before we see what became of this latest attempt in the literary field, it is only right to know something of the conditions of country life at that time. What of the years preceding those in which this nest of singing birds was hatched?

By 1750 the average English village had settled down, or rather relapsed, not into the ordered stability which it had enjoyed during the Middle Ages, but into a tolerable composure. Rural life was far from being moribund. Customs, folk-lore and folk-song were still honoured although only in restricted forms: the community spirit had survived. At least 75 per cent. of the population still earned a living from the land.

No sooner had the affairs of the lower orders begun to mend, however, than the Agrarian Revolution upset them again. Old wounds were reopened. In the reign of George III no less than 300 Acts of Enclosure were passed; and though the change-over was accomplished piecemeal (—the last fell swoop was delayed until the Act of 1845) nobody knew whose farm might be the next to be taken away. Enclosure was a sword of Damocles threatening most villagers.

In the interests of progress the open-field system *had* to go. It *was* imperative that waste lands and commons should be placed under cultivation in order to supply the needs of a rapidly growing, industrial population; and maybe it was in the public interest that the landed gentry should be given a greater measure of control. The alternative of wholesale famine was, no doubt, very real. But all this does not alter the fact that the peasantry (what was left of it) suffered because of it. As had happened in the sixteenth century, the common or garden worker was powerless to prevent his means of livelihood being taken from him. True, he always had the *right* to demand his little plot, but claims for land had to be submitted in *writing*,

and as he was quite illiterate it is easy enough to see what happened. The lord of the manor, the parson, the free-holder and other impropietors took good care to see that they were more than amply compensated for any changes that occurred. The cottager was without means of redress. From now on he lived a hand-to-mouth existence, dependent on a day-to-day pittance. Production had increased, yes; but so had rents. Workers on the land were rapidly becoming the victims of sweated labour. Instead of a bold peasantry the country could only boast a landless proletariat.

The little man was knocked out: an oligarchy of great families had taken possession of the land. As a result, most of the incentives which had made the owner-worker's life on the land so worth while, simply disappeared. In the old days, for instance, haymaking had been hard work but good sport, not unattended by revels. But to have to make hay for a starvation wage was nothing better than drudgery, hard-labour: it had become merely utilitarian, materialist. Inevitably the demands of the new factories absorbed the majority of those who were thus driven from the land, but the true peasant was always loath to leave his home, hovel as it was; there was always a considerable residue which had to face prospects of certain misery and want. Throughout the eighteenth century Enclosure had produced a general upward trend in prices, and the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars forced them up to famine level. For a few years after 1830 a spell of unusual agricultural prosperity set in—too late: and in any case the farm labourer had no benefit of it, for already the man was being replaced by the machine. By that time it is no exaggeration to say that the whole structure of rural society had been rebroken on the wheel of progress.

From the beginning of the nineteenth century the situation which enabled tenant farmers to force down wages and refuse employment to hinds who showed themselves in any way independent was steadily aggravated. The peasants who in

the fourteenth century responded to John Ball's appeals, had fought only for the preservation of customary rights, but the wretches who followed Captain Swing and his machine-wreckers were infinitely more desperate. They were driven by exasperation and despair. The Tolpuddle Martyrs, indeed, supplied the type rather than the exception.

This, then, was the economic background of the period which was to see the "Peasant Revival". If the spiritual opportunity seemed good the economic situation was, to put it mildly, not so good. Throughout their lifetime, before their own eyes, all that these men stood for was being swept away. Before they died the bottom had dropped out of their little world.

In 1820 Burns had already been dead twenty-four years, (—like Shakespeare he was lucky in his birth-date). Bloomfield was fifty-four, at the end of his tether. Hogg was fifty, still going strong. Clare was twenty-seven, at the height of his powers. William Barnes was just born. There were others, of course (perhaps Ebenezer Elliott is worth mentioning), but these were the leaders. A motley crew, sporadics. Nor were they quite unheralded. Even before it acknowledged Clare as its county poet, Northamptonshire had boasted a village Sappho, Jane Leapor, who wrote near-poetry and succumbed at the age of twenty-four. And there had already occurred that strange "phenomenon of Wiltshire", Stephen Duck (—trust a peasant poet to be cursed with such a name!)—whose "Thresher's Labour" had been published as far back as 1736. The ugly Duck, however, is not really part of the story. He was raised above his station by well-meaning clergy, by courtiers, even by Queen Caroline herself who commended him to Pope. Gay called him "the fortunate poet of the Court". Swift cut him dead with an envious epigram. Really, the poor fellow ceased to be anything at all, ended up by turning parson, writing congratulatory pieces to the Royal Family, going mad, drowning himself (appropriately enough) in a duck-pond. Regarding his

"translation" it is recorded that even in lunacy he remained "modest and grateful to his *benefactors*": so evidently he remained true at heart to the peasant type.

The case of the unlucky Duck is worth recalling. It was an omen of what was to follow.

Of Burns least said the better the criticism. A proper countryman, though of yeoman rather than of peasant stock, he is the exception which disproves every rule of criticism: the Admirable Crichton of commoners. In some way not to be explained he was able to take the existing folk-song (not always Scottish, either—for some folk-song has a habit of ignoring local and even national boundaries) and transform it at a touch into immaculate art. Without his predecessors he could have done nothing. First and last, he is a writer of songs, the direct heir to a long ancestry of unacknowledged folk-poets. He was himself the first to recognize the fact.

Burns provides the supreme example of what a communal tradition of song can achieve in time, by slow and imperceptible evolution. Professor Nichol Smith clinches the argument in a single phrase: "his function was to carry on".¹ So conscious he was of his debt to the old "makers", that he had few or no pretensions of his own: his unfailing humility prevented his wishing to become any better or higher than he was. He remains, consequently, a man of the people. "A man's a man for a' that" is all the politics or philosophy he deems necessary.

His method? Burns never *invents*. Even when he is not lyrical—which is not often—his sources are steeped in folklore. "Tam o'Shanter", for instance, is full of it: what else is the wilderness that Tam must traverse and the bridge that he must cross but the Whinny Muir and Brig o' Dread of North Country folk-song—symbols of Doom? The scholars have made much of Burns's literary training and it would indeed be futile to pretend that his was an untrained voice. On the other hand, it is obvious enough that he never gave much

¹ *Some Observations on Eighteenth-Century Poetry*. P. 76.

thought to problems of technique or theories of composition. He wrote by ear. Surely his own evidence is enough to prove the truth of this: "I never had the least thought or inclination of turning poet till I got heartily in love and then rhyme and song were, *in a manner*, the spontaneous language of my heart . . ." and again: "I have two or three times in my life composed from the wish rather than the impulse, but I never succeeded to any purpose." "Merely a few of Nature's instincts", he says elsewhere—as if that were enough to account for the secret of his art. And again: "What damn'd Egotism!" he cries at the end of a letter, in which he has been trying to give an account of himself at work and his methods. He knew, better than anyone, that impersonality was the saving grace of poet and poem alike, that self-inquiry was no virtue.

Those who *must* look for an explanation of Burns's felicitousness may find it, as like as not, in "Auld lang syne", itself an adaptation of an age-old, favourite Scottish air, as are so many of his songs. Surely it is just that "auld acquaintance" ("community spirit" is our harsher modern equivalent), that line of forgotten singers no longer "brought to myne", which supply the clue to the secret of his art.

In its economic and social history Scotland had always been a country apart. Conditions there were more stable and as a result the continuity of folk-song was far less interrupted than it was in England. And the end was a *national* poet, a poet of the people, by the people, for the people . . . a genuine countryman. South of the Border not only was the breed more mixed, producing Yorkshireman, Kentishman, Cockney—the local patriot—but circumstances there never allowed of tradition reaching maturity.

As Englishmen, are we not the losers? Certainly, unless you are a Scotsman the question, "Is Burns as great as Shakespeare?" does not arise. Only change it and ask, "Which of the two is closer to the people—more *popular*?" and you will find your honesty severely tested. To pretend that he is a lesser

figure because he was primarily a song-writer only, is to confuse greatness with size: it is equivalent to arguing that Michael Angelo is necessarily greater than, say, Vermeer because a ceiling is larger than a wooden panel. We cannot measure achievement merely by a personal scale. The real dimensions of Art are to be found *outside* the individual: its vital aspects depend upon social and spiritual tradition, upon the transmissions of history and race. Consequently "the most universal and most human works of art are those which bear most openly the mark of their country".¹

Universal Burns certainly is and "*most human*"—with the gentle humanity, weatherbeaten stoicism and naked vision of one whose finer instincts have been purified by personal and by ancestral communion with the soil. A real earth-man.

But we must not claim too much for the peasant poet. By himself he can do nothing. Obviously his outlook can never be so comprehensive as that of the intellectual genius. Quite apart from his own limitations (in nature as well as nurture), the peasant author's whole purpose is circumscribed by the expectations of his fellows. Whatever he says or sings must be familiar from the start: he must be communal or deny his calling. He can never launch out, never be original, without in some way betraying his trust. Hence the tragic failure of the peasant renaissance of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The gulf between folk-poetry and official literature had grown too great for them to breach it. The village minstrel had become too localized: there was no substantial body of support to back him in his venture into the wider arena. Everything he did had to be modified by requirements which were foreign to his nature. The spirit of the age demanded that he should be an *individual*. His attempts to cover his starkness with a veneer of conventional culture not only limited him to a second-best success—they involved a complete vilification of the peasant muse. They falsified his

¹ J. Maritain: *Art and Scholasticism*. P. 79.

position from the start, led him into all manner of compromise and subterfuge, until at last he ceased to be himself.

Hogg's case is typical. Ettrick Shepherd, the belated minstrel turned journalist. He began as folk-singer and ended as *littérateur* (—"hypocrite lecteur"). At his best he had the child-like innocence, simplicity, that wind-on-the-heath freshness which is the genuine peasant's unique gift; but he was so rarely at his best! His output was prolific, yet he lacked all power of self-criticism; and though he was lucky in finding a market for his imitative ballads and romances after the folk-tale manner, his work became progressively meretricious. The Shepherd had become the *poseur*, a little Wordsworth. He is at his best in his "first period", even when he is passing off as original (often under the guise of archaism), what he has, in fact, inherited from folk-poetry.

Hear him:

The Herone flewe eist, the Herone flewe weste
 The Herone flewe to the fayr foryste.
 And ther scho sawe ane gudelye bouir
 Was all kledde ovir with the lille flour:
 And in that bouir ther was ane bedde,
 With silkine scheites, and welle dune spredde:
 And in thilke bed ther lay ane knichte,¹
 Hos oundis did bleide beth day and night;
 And by the bedde-syde ther stude ane stene,
 And thereon sate ane leil maydene,
 With silvere nedil, and silkene threde,
 Stemmyng the oundis quan they did blede . . .²

To be sure: what else is this but the mediaeval carole which we so much admired in a previous chapter?³ The resemblance is too obvious; and yet "The falcon hath born my make away" was not printed until 1895 when Flugel included it in his *Neuenglisches Lesebuch*, whereas Hogg's version appeared in Volume II of his *Winter Evening Tales* in 1820! Clearly the

¹ What had Hogg to do with Ingeld?

² "The Bridal of Polmood."

³ Supra, p. 47.

poem had been drifting up and down the country, sifted by folk-memory, altered by oral transmission, until Hogg picked it up and called it his own. Elsewhere he admits that the lines are "from a beautiful old rhyme which I have often heard my mother repeat, *but of which she knew no tradition*".¹

Incidentally, comparing the later with the earlier version, it is instructive to see how the poem has become secularized and so much less appealing. The inferiority in moral fibre and spiritual conviction, which we bemoaned so in the previous chapter, could not be more clearly illustrated than by this chance example. Time had brought with it a decline in human quality.

As Hogg went on he grew ambitious, became the friend of Scott, was fêted in London, until the Lowlanders knew him as a friend no more. He had ceased to be a folk-poet. He was wrong about his mother: she knew the value of tradition far better than he. How she rated him for daring to print folk-ballads!—"They were made for singin' an' no' for readin', but ye hae broken the charm noo, an' they'll never be sung mair."² She took no pride in her son's literary advancement: on the contrary, he was guilty of what was, in her eyes, an unforgivable presumption. How right she was! Hers was the typical peasant attitude. In much the same way the Basque musician, on learning that his hereditary tunes had been published, protested sorrowfully, "They have taken my tunes to Pampeluna. This is the end of them!"³

Clare's experience was much the same. His fellow-villagers at Helpston did not regard it as in any way remarkable that he should write verses: he was one of them, sang the same songs at the "Blue Bell" and the "Bone and Cleaver Club"—a good lad for a ballad. It was only when they learned that he was to have them published (in London, too!) that they came to regard him as an oddity, an informer in whom their con-

¹ E. C. Batho: *The Ettrick Shepherd*. P. 31.

² Ibid. P. 22.

³ V. Alford: *op. cit.* P. 10.

fidence had been misplaced. From that day his presence in their midst was resented.

Clare's tragedy is so significant, indeed, that his case is worth examining in detail. As peasant-poet he had gifts, attitudes of which the Romantics were scarcely aware: and in its humble way the quality which he wished to contribute was something more enduring than any which they possessed.

Circumstances prevented that contribution being made. Socially, the poet fell between two stools. For the sake of his art he had become an outcast among his own kind: and the city intellectuals regarded him as an interesting freak or, when the novelty of his first acquaintance was done, discarded him. Though the accounts which Clare has left of his conversations with Lamb, Hazlitt, Coleridge, Hood and the rest of the Londoners show that he could more than hold his own with them, it is clear that he could never have been really at home in company of this kind. Gradually he came to feel that he had been betrayed, lured on by flattering hopes and then neglected, left to his fate. Thus abandoned, he turned moody, fell into a sadness, thence to a watch, thence into a weakness, and so into the madness in which he raged at last. By little and little that happy impersonality which had been his at the outset—that objectivity which was to have been the folk-poet's contribution to literature—was taken from him. Put crudely, Clare was forced into Romanticism.

(The same fate had almost overtaken Burns. Study his life. Unable to make farming pay, unable to make more than a precarious living by his pen, he, too, ended his days among strange faces, other minds. . . . The Dumfries port authorities were hostile: he had lost the natural social setting without which he was helpless; and so, as far as writing went, his last nine years were largely unproductive. But then Burns was lucky—he died young, before an empty melancholy had time to cheat him out of his first attitude. At his best, even when he seems to be most individual, as in "My luve is like a red, red rose", his

emotion is not of the subjective order: it is only later, and with some surprise, that we discover that it is an adaptation of an old, popular song.¹ It is this impersonal sense which makes him so universal, preserves him from himself. Keats is never anything but Keats, Shelley remains Shelley, but Burns speaks for Everyman.)

For poor John Clare it was not to be. Success was just not in his stars. From his boyhood he was afflicted with the personal canker. His unfortunate love-affair with Mary Joyce (—unfortunate simply because, as a labourer, he was deemed unworthy), aggravated by his awareness of social inferiority, contributed largely to the blight which perverted him. Disappointment following on disappointment the way it did, he was forced in upon himself, became the self-consumer of his woes. He took refuge first, however, in the observation and recording of the common delights of Nature (the only solace left remaining): “snatches of sunshine and scraps of spring that I have gathered like an insect while wandering in the fields”.² For a time it seemed that these were riches enough: how often and valiantly did he protest that he was quite content to be the solitary singer; but all the while he suffered from a host of repressions like a linnet in a cage. Black melancholy was eating his heart away. He took refuge in his verse, then in a pseudo-mysticism, next in wishful hallucination (forcing himself to believe that Mary, his rustic Beatrice, was at his side—with such uncanny success that he ceased to regard Patty, who had borne his children, as his “real” wife), finally in the most doting of lunacies. His attempt to *realize* had become swallowed up in the effort to idealize (the same “ideal fallacy” which had dogged all post-Renaissance verse); and as a consequence he suffered an acute attack of split-personality. The inroads made by literary convention upon poetic tradition, by individualism upon communalism, cannot be more clearly demonstrated than by an examination of Clare’s case-history. As peasant he was

¹ See *infra*: “Deritus”. P. 201.

² From an unpublished MS.

utterly defenceless against the virus of modernism and the ravages which it made upon his health and sanity are plain to see. He was a survival of what had once been a common figure in every community—*The Village Minstrel* he called his second book of poems—now become a heart for daws to peck at. Once away from the shelter of his village he was exposed to all the vicissitudes which poetry had suffered since the break-up of the mediaeval world. The accumulated weight of history, concentrated into a few short years of his lifetime, bore him down. For a time he resisted bravely but it was too much . . . he never had a chance.

In his lucid intervals (—for twenty-one years he dragged out a life-in-death imprisonment in Northampton Asylum, “the land of Sodom where all the people’s brains are turned the wrong way”¹) Clare understood only too well the essential ghastliness of his failure:

. . . And yet I Am, and live with shadows, tost
 Into the nothingness of scorn and noise,
 Into the living sea of waking dreams
 Where there is neither sense of life nor joys
 But the vast shipwreck of my life’s esteems.

Even this was not the worst: before the end came he was reduced to such pitiful metaphysics as this:

Is nothing less than nought?
 Nothing *is* nought
 And there is nothing less.
 But something is, though next to nothing
 That a trifle seems: and such am I.²

Even in his last senilities he could not drown himself in commiseration as Cowper had done—though he had moments

¹ Letter to his wife, 19th July, 1848.

² From Clare’s unprinted (mostly unprintable) Northampton transcripts. Perhaps it is not fair to the poet to salvage such details: if so, I have endeavoured to make amends later in the chapter, by quoting some of his finer work, much of which has still to find a publisher.

of such haunting poignancy (expressed in second-childhood language) as have rarely been surpassed:

I left the little birds
And sweet lowing of the herds
And couldn't find out words
Do you see? . . .

But by that time Clare had become a cypher. As a folk-poet he was constitutionally unfitted to be a romantic, for romanticism implied individualism, idealism . . . therefore for him there was only one way out—cruellest idiocy. He could only have expressed himself fully through contacts with people like himself and with the earth by which he lived: only in them could he know himself more perfectly as a man and as a poet. Without this necessary environment his major instincts were denied. For one poet at least, the Tower had become terrifyingly real; and the pity of it was that he knew it . . . for more than twenty years.

There are, then, two Clares: the Seeker and the Lost. The first is solid, real: the second, for all its eldritch, latter-day prophecy, is hollow, unreal. The poetry of the one is gloriously visual—the peasant's eye: the other is visionary, the same eye in an inward frenzy rolling. His experience belied the truth of the adage, *sub cruce veritas*—for though his ultimate darkness was not entirely unrelieved, pierced here and there by squinting gleams—the light had been taken away from him. His best work, as his first reviewer was quick to point out, was “composed altogether from the impulses of the writer's mind, *as excited by external objects*”.¹ The peasant finds his meaning in the soil. Remove that and he is like a fish out of water.

It is rather surprising to find so eminent an authority on country matters as Mr. H. J. Massingham declaring that Clare was, in fact, not a peasant.² He classes him as a labourer-poet. Surely the worst of quibbles. Certainly Clare was never

¹ *Quarterly Review*, 1820.

² *The English Countryman*.

allowed to be anything better than a wage-earner, though it was his cherished ambition to have his own farm (an ambition which might easily have been realized had it not been for the niggardliness of his "trustees and benefactors"). But we have already shown that as a class the English peasantry had ceased to exist. After the middle of the eighteenth century the title is a courtesy; and to-day, in the absence of any better definition, the *Oxford English Dictionary* assures us that it signifies "one who lives in the country and works on the land, either as a small farmer or labourer; the name is applied to any rustic of the working classes". No doubt the term has lost its definitive meaning, but in so far as it may be used at all it would be truer to assert not only that Clare is a peasant-poet but that he is (at any rate in the modern period) the only peasant-poet that this country has produced.

Massingham claims that dubious honour for Dorset's William Barnes, chiefly on the grounds that whereas Clare "muses and dreams alone", Barnes partakes in and expresses the life of the village community. Which is true enough—up to a point. We have already admitted that Clare was driven to play the recluse and we have sought to show how it went against his better nature; but by breeding, work and wish he was of the soil. Barnes was not. To be sure, he loved his parishioners, but however sincerely he may have tried to live with them he was never of them. The community-sense was not bred in him: his friend Thomas Hardy says of him merely that though Barnes "was not averse to social intercourse, his friendship extended over but a small area of society",¹—which certainly does not suggest the born folk-poet.

The fact remains that of all these so-called peasant writers Clare was the only one who achieved that peculiar balance of brain and body, the tireless uncomplaining patience of the land-serf. The peasant's shrewdness, self-reliance (*and* self-effacement), natural piety, steady dignity, composure, good taste

¹ The Rev. Wm. Barnes, B.D. *Life and Art.* P. 55.

(*and* execrability) were his: he did not have to assume them. His was the essential modesty of one accustomed to zero status, not the affected humility of one who wished to associate himself with country-folk because, in doing so, he believed himself to be committing an act of faith: Clare could never have been anything other than the cottager.

Not so the others. While he was still a lad, Bloomfield left his village for the town and never returned. He tried to cash-in on the contemporary fashion for rural verse, exploiting his lowly origins, but in his later verse there is more of mustiness than earth or air. He made the fatal mistake of pretending to be literary, of being better than he really was. His genuine talent was not developed: his vital seed was choked by the parched weeds of Horatianism.

Barnes is a better poet, but different. With him the problem of finding the necessary level was reversed: he felt the need rather to condescend than to aspire; if he could, he would have stooped to conquer, but only because an intellectual theory prompted him that in so doing he was taking a short-cut to success. But can a comfortable cleric ever be a peasant? His is not the time-worn tranquillity of the labourer, but the serenity born of a sheltered and leisurely private-life. For all his antiquarian delvings, he could not reach that bedrock upon which Clare took his stand from the beginning. This is not to deny that Barnes is a true countryman, nor that in his verse rusticity is fused with meaning to a degree rarely achieved by other dialect-poets. But to claim that "his verse is the old communal folk-song made the vehicle of an individual spirit whose re-interpretation of it was an act of genius",¹ is a misguided enthusiasm. Such a statement may be true of Burns: applied to Barnes it is meaningless.

Barnes loved the country right enough, and he loved his villagers. Better still, perhaps, he loved the tenacious culture and democracy of Wessex—memories of a departed kingdom.

¹ H. J. Massingham: *op. cit.*

Most of all, he loved the surviving relics of common speech, which interested him far more than did the people themselves. He was always very much the aesthete, the archaeologist-philologist working to support a determined theory: more interested in "folkdom"¹ than in folk.

Dialect was his only real passion—Barnes was always more interested in words than in things. He made a systematic study of them and the resultant knowledge he applied with perfect deliberation. At best it enabled him to attain a certain pleasing fluency as in his well-known "Linden Lea" and "Fear Ellen Dare O'Lindenore", but always the effect was gained by means of an elaborate and premeditated technique. Too often, however, his sweetness cloyed; and at its worst the vesture of wilful rusticity repels. His stanza forms are often intricate, always studied: by comparison, Clare is looser limbed, hoydenish, careless. Barnes's art is always a little too obvious: it comes between us and his meaning:

An' zome o'm be a-wanten' bread
 Zome, better off, ha' died;
 Noo mwore to ho²
 Vor hwomes below
 The trees a-swayen to an' fro.

The elegy lacks conviction. Its emotion is not his own: *he* was not touched with the miseries which attended the decay of the English countryside. He could never feel himself personally implicated: he was only there in the capacity of observer, a stranger within the gates; his real interests were elsewhere. His meaning, consequently, is secondary, faint. Contrast the sweetness of this easy-going lament with the soured bitterness of Clare's indictments of Enclosure.

In one of his latest conversations, Barnes was recorded as extremely indignant that the word "bicycle" should have gained so strong a foothold in the English language: "Why didn't they call it 'Wheel-saddle'?" he exclaimed. The incident is some-

¹ The word is his own.

² Wish.

how typical of the man. It confirms the general impression—the philological crankiness of a lovable but remote personality, the Anglian divine working away at his resurrected “word-lore” in his snug vicarage retreat. A true poet but a Tower-dweller as much as any of them—and more than most.

Then there was Hawker of Morwenstowe. He, too, dallied with the idea of making folk-song articulate as literature, but to bring him in as another instance of a peasant-poet serves no useful purpose. Mr. Massingham tries.¹ (Has he forgotten that Hawker won the Newdigate Prize in 1827: surely a notable achievement for peasant genius?)

As a sustained and serious effort to state the countrymen’s fundamental point of view in universal terms, Clare’s attempt stands alone. It broke him, but he made it.

In order to understand something of that point of view it is necessary to read his first *Poems descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery*, the volume which ran into three editions in 1820 and made the “Northamptonshire peasant” for a brief interval the lion of the literary world; not that it contains his best work, but because it shows us the Clare that could have been. Necessary, too, to know of his intensely happy childhood to which he was ever afterwards referring, elysian days spent in a countryside which was, even at that time, beginning to be encroached upon: and of his parents who, to while away winter evenings, sang the traditional folk-ballads, “Peggy Band”, “Lord Randal”, “Barbara Allen” and all the rest of them. The father, Parker Clare, one-time wrestler, labourer, now parish-pauper, was a born teller of tales, a man with a picturesque turn of phrase and speech, one who was always in great demand as an entertainer at the village feasts. One of his proudest boasts was that he could sing or recite more than a hundred popular rhymes (—not by any means a remarkable claim when we consider that Cecil Sharp, not so very long ago, came upon an old lady of ninety who could remember 10,000 lines of folk-poetry).

¹ Loc. cit.

Though the poet's father was quite ignorant (—he could read a little, his wife not a word), he was, in his rough way, possessed of certain hereditary graces and attributes. Education and culture, remember, are not convertible terms. In his degenerate way, old Parker Clare seems to have been another of those unacknowledged singers of whom we have so frequently tried to make so much; nurse not unmeet for his poetic child. Sitting at his knees, young John caught the habit of listening, the love of speaking in rhyme. To be sure he had schooling of another sort, but the primary education of his genius was of the time-honoured variety—oral. In that cottage home there was a natural feeling for poetry of a kind which we can scarcely understand, such as survives to-day only in Wales and those remoter districts where “people” are still “folk”.

There was, too, that ancient sybil of Helpston Heath, Granny Bains: as a boy he met with her while tending sheep or crow-scaring. Another Meg Merrilees, she taught him tales in verse, and more ballads. And then the fiddling gipsies—to the end of his life their way of life had a strange fascination for the poet.

Such the original Clare. His real authorship derived from the unwritten poetry of the commonalty, that remnant of a tradition which had so long conducted an underground struggle for survival. Literature of this kind had always been spontaneous, social, necessary only to the occasion which evoked it and which it served. Its composition seems amorphous to us only because our conventionally “superior” attitude prevents our understanding, or partaking in it: its essence lay entirely in the exercise of the human voice. Clare himself confesses, “I made a many things before I ventured to commit them to writing . . . imitations of some popular songs *floating among the vulgar at the markets and fairs till they were common to all*”.¹ True, it was not long before he was reading and imitating models more dignified, Thomson, Cowper and “old Tusser”; but these were secondary influences.

¹ Tibble: *Life of John Clare*.

(All this may seem unnecessarily tedious in detail. But the original tradition so rarely appears on the surface that when it does we must not fail to insist upon its vital importance. In spite of every misfortune and neglect, folk-poetry *had* contrived to remain a force in the land, and without some appreciation of this continuity we shall not be able to account for Clare's uniqueness. It made him the peculiar blend of weakness and strength that he was—indigent and indigene. It explains his many faults of style, diffuseness, formlessness, repetitiveness, his carelessness of grammar or sense, the too-obviousness of his sentiment, his inability to state an argument: explains, too, his unpredictableness, the sudden glories, the concise, intermittent phrase that hits the ear and mind unawares, taking the winds of poetry with beauty.)

One of the first poems in the 1820 volume was "The Maid of Ocrum, or, Lord Gregory", beginning:

Gay was the Maid of Ocrum
As lady e'er may be
Ere she did venture past a maid
To love Lord Gregory.

Fair was the Maid of Ocrum
And shining like the sun
Ere her bower key was turned on two
Where bride bed lay for none. . . .

Nothing could be less pretentious, yet in its terse, unaffected way it carries us straight back to the sixteenth century and beyond. It is, in fact, an adaptation of one of those "popular songs floating among the vulgar". The original (in so far as a ballad may be said to have one) is traceable to Ireland, where a song "The Lass of Aughrim" had long been popular. A version of this latter was printed for the first time in William Chappell's *Roxburghe Ballads*, 1871, more than half a century after Clare's publication. Another, inevitably, is to be found in Child's compendious collection. As with Hogg, so here: the inference is obvious.

Not to the 1820 critics, however. "Here are no tawdry and feeble paraphrases of former poets", said the *Quarterly* reviewer, but he could not resist a patronizing afterthought: "some of his ballad stanzas rival the native simplicity of Tickell or Mallett." Faint praise, though doubtless it was well intended, typical of the complete misunderstanding which greeted Clare from the outset.

I wish, I wish, but all in vain
I wish I was a maid again.
A maid again I cannot be
O when will green grass cover me?

—you do not have to search Child's tomes to know whence that came. You will certainly not find it in Tickell. In its maturity, Clare's genius was peculiarly descriptive: later still it turned contemplative; but from start to finish all he wrote was shaped by the loose ballad-pattern, every verse underlined by a vocal influence. Even in his last asylum drivellings it was the same:

And then they closed the shutters up
And then they closed the door.

One of his fellow inmates has recorded how the poet "*always sang with a repeat . . . with a degree of emphasis that seemed to be rather elevating and somewhat touching*".¹ Precisely.

But the state of literature would not allow it. Had there been a more substantial corpus of folk-poetry "floating among the vulgar" his career might have been different. The communal tradition, unfortunately, had lost its cumulative effect: its hoary antiquity debased by social and economic evils. Such authentic scraps as came to hand he used, but most of the material left was by that time all but worthless. Here again Clare was far less fortunate than Burns. He was largely without precedents.

Nor was this the only disability under which he laboured.

¹ Northampton Asylum MSS.

The process by which folk-poetry had been dissociated from the printed page merely reflected the persistent tendency of literature to keep aloof of the language of common speech. Not only that, either, for common speech had itself suffered a change for the worse. The Industrial Revolution, education (of sorts), newspapers—everything tended to reduce the beauty of right speaking to utility standards: and in the process language somehow lost grace, immediacy... mystery. Instead of communities there were institutions: rural customs had been replaced by urban regulations, the singing voice by the hum of printing-machines. At the opening of the nineteenth century any farmer's lad might still have spoken of "a plume of trees on the far hills" without the phrase being thought in any way unusual or picturesque. This lack of affectation in the use of words was rapidly becoming a thing of the past. So was pride in one's own language. Language suffered the same inflation as finance: its gold was exchanged away for paper currency.

True common speech was fast becoming localized, a curious survival. As urbanization and intellectualism took to themselves an ever-increasing measure of control, the breach between artisan and artist was widened. The two no longer shared a common consciousness: they had ceased to speak the same language.

Certainly Clare was never clearly conscious of the whole unfortunate issue. He could only see it in its more patent manifestations in his everyday life, in the ploughing up of his boyhood haunts—the felling of his old favourite Lea Close Oak, the desecration of Swordy Well, the suspicion of his neighbours, the steady deterioration in his relations with his publishers, royalties dwindling, family increasing....

The jostling world was not long in losing interest. The Londoners, for all their early kindness, soon tired of him, found him tedious, out of place, a bit of an oddity. From time to time he took holiday trips to town to seek the stimulus of

their company; but the heady conversations upset him, he was aware of their ill-hid condescension and fled back to his troubled household. There was no refuge in society: he just *had* to get away from it all!

This was getting "back to Nature" with a vengeance. Previously poets had returned thither more because they felt themselves in need of a change of air, for fresh imagery, fresh inspiration. In Nature Crabbe found copious matter for new description. Wordsworth distilled from it his philosophy of dead things. The painters took it to irradiate their canvases, Constable for freshness, Turner for atmosphere, Danby in hopes to catch the light that never was on sea or land . . . but for Clare Nature was the all-in-all. He did his best to believe that it was enough, to be grateful for nothing:

Summer is prodigal of joy. The grass
Swarms with delighted insects as I pass.
And crowds of grasshoppers at every stride
Jump out all ways, with happiness their guide;
And from my brushing feet moths flit away
In safer places to pursue their play.
In crowds they start!,—I marvel: well I may
—And more,—to see each thing however small
Sharing Joy's bounty that belongs to all.
And here I gather, by the world forgot,
Harvests of comfort from their happy mood,
Feeling God's blessing dwells in every spot
And nothing lives but owes Him gratitude.¹

Yet even God's blessing was only given to be taken away, it seemed. Hateful Enclosure came creeping closer on every side, threatening his little world. It made him mad to see how

Freedom's cottage soon was thrust aside
And workhouse prisons raised upon the site.

¹ From the Peterborough Museum MSS. (as are most of the Clare quotations in this chapter).

E'en Nature's dwellings far away from men,
The common heath, became the spoiler's prey;
The rabbit had not where to make his den . . .

—nor the poet his.

The story of Clare's gradual encirclement and the futility of his lonely struggle, makes bitter-sweet reading; but one which will always be worth the retelling. The quick success of his first book was scarcely maintained by *The Village Minstrel* of 1821. Of his *Shepherd's Calendar* (1827), barely 500 copies were sold, despite the fact that it contained poetry far in advance of anything he had done before. Thereafter Taylor and Hessey were chary of venturing good money on further publications. Tastes had changed; and now that its novelty had worn off, Clare's style no longer had any market value. It was not alluring, not sufficiently "romantic". In spite of all his pleadings and protestations he could not gain a hearing for what he had to say. Meanwhile his financial position was becoming desperate and he had a large and growing family to support. He had to fall back on footling contributions to second-rate periodicals in order to earn a few shillings. Conditions on the land were as bad as they could have been and to make matters worse illness now prevented him from earning anything like an adequate living. The general discontent of the lower agricultural classes revealed itself in the riots of 1831. Days of exasperation, nights lurid with rick-fires: but Clare's mind was darkening with more than material troubles. After heart-breaking delays and niggardly prevarications Taylor at last consented to risk a further publication. *The Rural Muse*, which appeared in 1835, had a modified success and helped somewhat to defer the ultimate disaster. Thereafter the poet was quietly but firmly cold-shouldered.

The circumstances in which *The Rural Muse* finally appeared were galling in the extreme. Disgusted by the indifferent treatment he had received at the hands of his publishers, Clare had long tried to get his poems into print by private initiative

(—he was already reduced to peddling copies of his previous volumes from door to door), but the hundred subscribers necessary for the promotion of the new venture were not forthcoming. Of all his acquaintances there were not a dozen willing to back him to the extent of purchasing a copy (price 7s. 6d.) of his "proposals" for the projected "Midsummer Cushion". To-day his carefully prepared manuscript lies fading in a glass case in the Peterborough Museum. Yet it was chock-full of good things and could have been a crowning achievement. Much of it was used in the 1835 volume, but in the end the poet was compelled to submit to all manner of supervision from Taylor: otherwise not a word would have seen the light of day. It was Taylor who decided what must go in, what be left out; Taylor who corrected the errors of spelling, inserted all punctuation marks, altered as he thought fit—and all in such a take-it-or-leave-it attitude that Clare was left as helpless as a baby.

It would be wrong to picture Taylor as the unscrupulous rascal. On the balance, his dealings with Clare were honest enough. Even when the poet had been put away Taylor seems to have had spasms of remorseful kindness. As to the rough-handling of texts, *some* sort of editing was essential—as anyone who has seen Clare's manuscripts will have realized. (Even Keats had to accept the same treatment. "My dear Taylor," he wrote, "your alteration strikes me as being a great improvement. And now I will attend to the punctuations you speak of" (Letter XLII).—Evidently Keats was not so stoutly independent as a Clare.)

Nothing, in fact, could more clearly illustrate the growing difference between country and town than a study of this strange relationship between the poet and his publisher. In a strained and distant way each respected—and utterly failed to understand—the other. How could it have been otherwise? Their private worlds were worlds apart. Clare was the earth-born child, lover of simple things, intuitive: Taylor the suave,

shrewd intellectual. Picture Clare out in a shower, sheltering by Langley Bush to scribble verses on the back of a sugar-bag or an election bill: ¹ picture Taylor in his out-of-office hours studying Egyptology, or his favourite author, Locke, exposing Junius, writing on problems of finance. Clare in his cottage, with lunacy already nattering at his ear, writing that he is half-convinced his mind is bewitched: Taylor in his town-house (too busy to allow himself to be much concerned) writing back a reasoned argument that the poet's superstitions were groundless, cold reassurance. One was a survivor from an England that was dead or dying. The other was a typical representative of the newer spirit of progress. The one dealt in *things* for idealist ends; the other thought in terms of ideas for materialist ends. Their outlooks were opposed.

If Spenser erred in commending himself to the scholars for protection, Clare was compelled to submit to far worse masters. He was at the mercy of those who insisted on treating him not as a child only, but as a problem-child. Everything he wrote had to be submitted to *their* censorship. With inherent fatalism he resigned himself to their ceaseless interferences, knowing himself to be at a permanent disadvantage, but there were times when it went against the grain. As a peasant there was always a certain amount of stiff-necked independence about him. Personal vanity he did not know, but he felt the craftsman's solicitude for his work. Sending off a first draft of a midnight-oil poem hastily done "when the headache was very mortifying and the bed very enticing" he suddenly recalls a previous effort which has been returned with Taylor's suggested emendations, and adds, sourly, "I can't say I much like the two first lines of the alteration . . . I shall give my reasons as a critical Bard (not as a critical wolf who mangles to murder)". Clearly he was not always at their service, their obedient John Clare.

But though he might kick against the pricks like this there was no real measure of freedom left to him. When he deter-

¹ Still preserved.

mined to go his own way, regardless alike of publishers, critics and friendly advisers, the results were ignominious. Such a venture was his "Pleasures of Spring".¹ Written in 1828, it was intended to be a sort of *magnum opus*: certainly his correspondence suggests that Clare was considering writing a long poem which would be after his own heart, irrespective of the modes and moods then prevailing among the poetry-reading public. Both Cary and Darley, his unofficial literary executors, did their best to dissuade him from proceeding with it, possibly because they felt his genius was not fitted for a major flight. They were all against it—the poem would never *sell*—but he persisted.

The consequence? "Pleasures of Spring", which was to have been the *pièce de résistance* of the ill-fated "Midsummer Cushion", was so persistently ignored that even to-day it is left languishing in its original notebook. Symonds, Blunden and Tibble, who have done so much to salvage Clare's unpublished work, saw it there but evidently thought fit to pass by on the other side. Yet despite a host of faults it contains the real Clare. Rambling, shapeless, gratuitous as it is, it is nevertheless more than worthy of being resurrected—and not merely for its occasional beauties, either. It reveals the peasant-poet in all his strength and weakness. It alternates between bathos and sublimity in most unaccountable fashion: irritates, disappoints, bores . . . and suddenly delights. As a whole it is very far from satisfactory and yet (paradoxically) on the whole it satisfies. It would have been strange, indeed, had Clare succeeded where Shelley, Keats, Byron and even Wordsworth had failed—in mastering the long poem. Matthew Arnold was not far from it when he wrote "English poetry of the first quarter of this nineteenth century; with plenty of energy, plenty of creative energy, *did not know enough*".² Certainly there was a deal of things on which poor Clare was uninformed.

¹ The full text is given in an appendix.

² *The Function of Criticism at the Present Time*.

If the characteristic faults of the oral tradition in English verse are to be diffuse, to be un-self-critical, to lack art, then the "Pleasures of Spring" has them all in full measure.

The blackthorn deepens in a darker stain
 And *brighter freckles* hazle shoots regain;
 The woodland rose in bright array is seen
 Whose bark receives, like leaves, a vivid green;
 And *foulroyce twigs as red as stock doves' claws*
 Shines in the woods, to gain the bard's applause.¹

Gaucheness and felicity. One line reflects all the hackneyed abstractions and conventional diction of the worser kind of the eighteenth-century verse: the next comes up as fresh as a daisy. Was ever poetry quite so consistently, so aggravatingly uneven? Yet these are but minor undulations: as with Cædmon or Langland there is no effort to maintain more than a minimum-standard style, to achieve any *personal* success. The poet is content to wind about and in and out: there is plenty of time; and like the true Englishman he knows he will muddle through in the end. So the "Pleasures" pursues the even tenor of its way, aiming nowhere, getting nowhere . . . admiring trees and flowers by the wayside, noticing countrymen at work in the fields, pausing now to indulge in idle thoughts (all vague), telling now of children's games, geese on the green, village superstitions, now the celandine,

Like a bright star Spring-tempted from the sky
 Reflecting on its leaves the sun's bright rays
 That sets its pointed glories in a blaze
 —So bright that children's fancys it deceives
 Who think that sunshine settles in its leaves. . . .

So Clare strays. His Milkmaid "loiters along": his Shepherd "guesses on": his Husbandman "muses in pleasure on his homeward way": his Boy "soodles on". So does the poem. It is written as a labourer might hoe a field of turnips, with no eye on the ending, no thought of what is to come next, but with a

¹ Italics mine: I give it here as Clare wrote it, with all its imperfections on its head.

massive, unquestioning patience which sustains the work and makes it not ignoble. It has a heavy and leisurely dignity such as only the born landworker can achieve—dignity which is none the less real for being so little acknowledged.

Judged by usual standards of heroic-couplet criticism most of the "Pleasures of Spring" is pedestrian, a clumsy attempt to copy a style that Crabbe had already written far better, Goldsmith best of all. Compare it with "The Deserted Village" and it is a thing of clay. Both grammar and spelling are atrocious, the rhymes almost invariably obvious, the sentiment commonplace: and when it comes to expressing even the most elementary thought Clare tends to be muddle-headed or, worse, loose-mouthed. The language is an unhappy mixture: one moment birds are "left mourning in their sad despair" (stuffed, no doubt)—the next a live Northamptonshire Lapwing comes "whewing" overhead, a Kite "swees" in the wind and a Partridge goes "nimbling" through the stubbles. There is much that might well be omitted. Clare was nothing if not prolific. As the scop had sung, so he wrote—for the sheer pleasure of "unlocking the word horde"—and when it came to erasure or revision he was too indolent or else too indifferent. Words came, he put them down and was content to leave them at that. Like the hoer in the field, it never occurred to him to consider—certainly not to reconsider—his work, nor did he deem it necessary to smooth off raw edges. Whatever other infinite capacities his genius possessed, that of taking pains was certainly not one: the poem remained a draft. Even when he came to recopy—and there are at least three versions of "Pleasures of Spring" in his own hand—he altered and removed nothing: all the original errors are allowed to stand. In the whole of his enormous output there are not more than one or two manuscripts ("The Thrush's Nest" is one) which show any signs of retouching: the rest came straight off the reel and were given no second thought.

From the critical point of view it would, no doubt, have

been better otherwise, but there it is: the peasant-poet remains a poet *and* a peasant. We must take him for what he is, accept the rough with the smooth, remembering the disabilities which so offset the abilities. Only when we think of poetry in terms of a national culture rather than in terms of intellectual, individual achievement, shall we begin to appreciate the importance of Clare—as a symptom. We need a lower as well as a higher criticism.

Regarded thus, the "Pleasures of Spring" has genuine worth, more, perhaps, than many of the published poems. No accident, either, that it should never have been printed. Its tempo is that of a time now past. Its movement is genial, unhurried, bespeaking an idle reflectiveness and an openness of mind quite alien to the intenser focus of the modern mood. To most of us it must seem lax, redundant, slow: but, then, so is "Piers Plowman", so are the ballads with their interminable refrains. To the land-serf time is of no account: as often as not, it is his sole luxury. Day by day, talking and singing to himself, he becomes *at length* identified with the unfeeling earth; but the effect is not that of a blank torpor. Though his thought grows vague his outlook gains in clarity: he is educated in a wise passiveness. *Some* communion occurs. Meaning emerges. *His* is a synthesis of mind, body and spirit which *we* lack: not materialist nor idealist but (in ways that we can only guess at) a blend of both.

For the "peasant-poet", then, poetry does need to be emotion recollected in tranquillity. For him poetry and emotion are one: tranquillity is all. He must not, as the intellectual must, be for ever analysing the nature of his own experience, striving to pinpoint

the experience
In a different form, beyond any meaning
We can assign to happiness.¹

¹ Eliot may protest as much as he likes—he is as much a romantic as any of them. So are we all. Francis Scarfe is right; whether we like it or not "we are in it up to the neck" (*Auden and After*. P. 184).

He does not strive for anything: the moment of insight comes without his expecting it—satisfies—and leaves no need for him to question its authenticity. He is content to *wait*.

"Pleasures of Spring" reflects this firm assurance of the peasant mind. Its childlike serenity may be too simple for the problematical needs of the twentieth century, its texture too earthy; but it has its occasional felicities:

The clouds of Heaven, scaled in many a dream . . .
Now long and green grows every laughing day . . .

it delights *in* things without troubling to think too much *about* them: the corncrake—

fairey left by night
To wander, blinded by the sunny light,

the little streams,

Loud laughing on their errands watering flowers
and the lanes

All carpeted anew with young silk-grass.

From it all there appears, not a personal philosophy such as Wordsworth pursued, but the rudiments of a country faith: Nature the All-giver, Nature the Leveller. If the poem has any real aim it is only to prove that

Spring's joys are universal and they fall
From an unsparing bounty blessing all:
The meanest thing that lives to crawl or flye
Has equal claims in her impartial eye,

—which to us, no doubt, is a truism.

Nature is all very fine but human nature is finer, as Keats very rightly realized. The more Clare took refuge in the country the more was he forced into a position of isolation from society—the distant, disgruntled spectator. When every prospect pleases and only Man is vile, what other home is there

for poet if not in Bedlam? And so in his last despair he wrote,
still thinking of Mary,

Had we ne'er been together
We'd ne'er ha' slighted ane anither
Never loved and never hated
Had we never been created. . . .

* * * * *

The Peasants' Revolt had failed. Yet as an attempt to emancipate poetry from literature it was not without deep significance. The trouble was that each of these men was so isolated as to be without influence; they were so cut off from all the original sources of their strength. In an age of hard-headed empiricism, of Benthamism, there was no place for the peasant: his still small voice was drowned by the juggernaut clangour of industry. As social entities they were complete misfits. Folk-poetry was no longer of general interest: *there was no folk*. Robbed of his audience, the rural minstrel had to content himself with alternatives. Either he could knuckle under, as Duck or Bloomfield did; in which case the best he could hope for was a third-rate performance. Or he could remain true to his original premises, the soil, in which case he remained localized (the "dialect poet") or was ignored. Clare alone made a major effort to break through, but he was driven back slowly and surely into that individuality so fateful for all of us, for him fatal. He could *not* pretend—as Barnes and Hawker pretended. Always he kept his feet firmly implanted on the earth; and when that was taken from him what else was there for it but

To realise his glowing dreams and flye
To the soft bosom of the sunny sky.

—the old Spenserian velleity?

CHAPTER VII

DETRITUS

SIR LESLIE STEPHEN once gave it as his opinion that the importance attached to books (usually by those who wrote them) was highly exaggerated: "Poets and novelists", he said, "might sometimes be surprised if they could realize the small impression they made upon the mass of the population."¹ Contrariwise, we might all be surprised if we could measure the influence of that vaster unwritten literature which, long after the Renaissance, retained a stubborn life of its own.

We cannot measure it. All we can do is point out its existence, now here, now there. The present chapter, accordingly, will be wild and whirling: sketches and scraps rather than a coherent survey. Our traditional folk-literature is dead, or so it seems, and we are left rummaging among its debris; but its demise is recent, and there is much that we can and need to learn from it.

Before examining the latter days of the English tradition it is necessary to turn back again to the beginning of the eighteenth century and see what became of the common folk. We have already argued that the English peasantry had, by 1700, recovered some of its former composure and stability, economically and probably socially. *Not ethically.* By that time the Church had ceased to have any real corporate existence: no longer, as had been the case throughout the mediaeval period, did it function authoritatively, providing the spiritual basis and background to the life of Everyman. The blatant selfishness and worldly lack of principle, typified in such politicians as Walpole or Newcastle, had infected the clergy; and though the middle-classes were more immune, they produced at best the

¹ *English Literature and Society in the Eighteenth Century.* P. 25.

ideal of a florid, roast-beef-of-old-England John Bull. (Fielding is, perhaps, its most obvious and finest exemplary.) Honesty and heartiness were its chief virtues; and admirable and respectable as these were it must be admitted that they represented a falling-off, a prosaic rather than a poetic ideal. Secularization was bought at a price.

The degenerate tendency which begins to be obvious about this time has already been referred to in connection with Hogg. As a class, however, the main body of country-folk still remained sound. The peasant was always the last to be affected by change and fashion. He still upheld the ancient customs—maypole revels, mummings and ceremonials—long after all their original ritual significance had been forgotten. Indeed, until comparatively recent times he maintained himself inviolate.

To an extent which few suspect. Throughout the nineteenth century agriculture adapted itself to all the uncertainties and opportunisms of a changing world—"record" years and "unprecedented" slumps. Farming was affected by all the forces of the industrial era; but not, apparently, the farmer. As late as the end of last century horses were still being sacrificed and hung in gibbets to propitiate the Unknown God and to bring good luck in cattle-breeding. Pagan prognostications were still in vogue: it was still possible to calculate one's length of days by holding a cherry tree branch and counting the cuckoo's calls, repeating

Cuckoo, cherry tree
Good bird tell me
How many years afore I dee?

Superstition? But it was more than that, retention, rather, of a dark and age-old faith.

On Shrove Tuesday the village children went from door to door (in places they still do) chanting some half-remembered doggerel:

Shroving, shroving, here we come a shroving,
A piece of bread, a piece of cheese

A piece of your fat bacon
 Dough nuts and pancakes
 All of your own making,¹

—the versions differing slightly from county to county. Their relevance and meaning may be lost to us (though not, probably, to the children). How extensive and how potent this customary rhyming has been it would be hard to say. Keats, when he wrote his “Eve of St. Agnes” and “Eve of St. Mark”, doubtless believed that he was harking back to a legendary past: it might have surprised him to know that long after his death such rites were still revered by North Country lasses. The performance—and the accompanying verses—varied slightly, though a similarity is observable in all. Thus in Northumberland the would-be bride must go corn-sowing at midnight, singing

Agnes sweet and Agnes fair,
 Hither hither now repair,
 Bonny Agnes, let me see
 The lad who is to marry me ¹

whereas in Derbyshire, “as supperless to bed she must retire” she uttered thrice

St. Agnes, be a friend to me
 In the gift I ask of thee
 Let me this night my husband see.

An even closer kinship can be discerned in the gibberish incantations at the Twelfth Night or Ascensiontide wassailing of the fruit-trees

Stand fast, root: bear well, top
 God send us a youling sop.
 Every twig apple big
 Every bough apple enow.

This, or something near it, may yet be heard in Kent, in Devon and Herefordshire and doubtless many localities besides. It verges on nonsense: it is not folk-song, certainly not poetry; but

¹ Cf. *Publications, Folk Lore Soc.*, Vol. II.

it does illustrate the tenacious retentiveness of customs and folk-memory. The invocation of the Tree Spirit is older than the Saxon charm, older than the supplications to Eolus, as old, indeed, as humankind. And the bonfires in the orchard, the hurrahings and the tipsyings, are they not survivals of Beltane, dim recollections of pagan experiences, still faintly disturbing to the modern consciousness? By itself the rhyme seems pitiful, particularly in its present form. It is, of course, a mere husk of its former self: but hear it uttered as it was originally intended—intoned at night and with the appropriate accompaniments,—and it is not without effect.

One virtue which country folk have always kept is the close connection between rhyme and magic. How many years have elapsed since the last of the beldames flapped her wet clout on the rock, thrice-chanting

I knock this rag upon this stane
To raise the wind in the divellis name
It sall not lye till I please again,¹

it would be hard to say: probably not so many as most of us imagine. Certainly the witchcraft of words is still not quite defunct. The rhythmic potency of the thrice-repeat has a strange fascination for primitive man the world over. It reminds us of the ballad, reminds us, too, how Coleridge (most supernaturally given of all the Romantics) used it to gain his finest effects in "The Ancient Mariner".²

Nevertheless, for us the words are so corrupt and garbled as to have lost their charm. In all folk-song it is a common thing to find that the words are inferior to the tunes and because of this it is often stated that it was the tune which mattered most.³ This belief is very far from accurate. The truth

¹ G. Fraser: *The Golden Bough*.

² "Alone, alone, all, all alone", "Water, water everywhere", "She smiled and whistled thrice", etc. Cf. also "A Dree Neer", *infra*.

³ *The Oxford Companion to Music*, for instance, says, "As a body the tunes are finer than the others, education being more of a factor in the production of a poem than of a tune" (P. 329). A misconception.

is that in their passage from mouth to mouth the words have suffered a succession of minor abrasions and modifications: the music is remembered more faithfully because, to the folk-singer, the whole "meaning" of the song is emotional rather than logical. The mumbo-jumbo of the Helston Furry Song and many of the speeches in the Mummers' Plays ("—I came to King Charles up a cast-iron pear tree. He asked I the way to get down. I said put thee feet in the stirrup iron and pitchee poll headfust into a marl-pit where ninety-five churches have been dug out . . .") show how content the peasant can be with the most drivelling nonsense, how he will go on repeating jargon long after all sense has fled.

Obviously the vital function of folk-poetry can never be quite apparent in any printed version. As the morris-dance proper was something more than a dance, having ceremonious implications and mysteries of its own, so with the language of folk-song. The words retain that inscrutable significance which we find so remarkable in primitive literatures. The early Saxons had it—and the Sagamen—and the ballad-makers, yet the modern world seems to have lost it. It sorts ill, apparently, with the too-rational state of mind. As an eighteenth-century critic explained,

Our forefathers looked upon nature with more reverence and horror, before the world was enlightened by learning and philosophy, and loved to astonish themselves with the apprehensions of witchcraft, prodigies, charms and enchantments. There was not a village that had not a ghost in it, every large common had a circle of fairies belonging to it and there was scarce a shepherd to be met with who had not seen a spirit.

We are upon enchanted ground, my friend. . . . In a word, you will find that the manners they paint, and the superstitions they adopt, are the more poetical for being Gothic.¹

¹ Richard Hurd: *Letters on Chivalry*, 1762: VI (included in *English Critical Essays*, ed. E. D. Jones. P. 369).

We no longer call it "Gothic" (though we have made great play of another word, "mediaeval", which means much the same) but we know what Hurd means.

When we hear such things as the Berkshire Maying Song,

We have been rambling all this night
And the best part of this day
And now have returned back
And have brought you a branch of May

or the old carol of Mary and Joseph:

Then up speaks the little child
In His own mother's womb
"Bow down, you sweet cherry tree
And give my mother some",

their effect upon us is of a kind which we find hard to explain. Each is equally careless of rhythm, devoid of all the usual literary tricks and yet we cannot find it in us to dismiss them as worthless: *the words are fey!* And yet their native worth is not proclaimed in ideas: it is not so much what they say as what they leave unsaid which gives them power. Whether or not they be poetic, they haunt us with a sweet sense of poetry. Possibly, as Sir J. G. Fraser has suggested,¹ we are still not totally unresponsive to the appeal of prehistoric tree-worship: certainly the language is valuable not so much for what it expresses as what it implies of vatic sense. Every syllable is loaded with more than meaning. It is, literally,

The Holy Word
That walked among the ancient trees.

It is this attribute of folk-poetry which seems to us so vital for the whole future of English literature. Shakespeare had it—this ability to make of the naked letter a symbol of awe, an omen—but generally speaking you will not often find it among the official poets. It has become progressively rarer. It is an attribute which defies analysis. All we can say is that it is

¹ *The Golden Bough.*

bound up with the evolutionary forces of tradition and that, once separated from them, it tends to disappear.

In the absence of a definition it may be useful to illustrate the truth of this by taking an actual example: possibly an anecdote may clarify our thesis more effectively than a laboured argument.

Some thirty years back that indefatigable student of English folk-lore, Cecil Sharp, was informed that if he cared to visit some of the Western States of America he would hear something to his interest and advantage. The pilgrimage was made. There, in the mountain districts of the Southern Appalachians Sharp was introduced to a genuine English peasantry, a community-folk who had preserved intact all the customs and graces of their immigrant ancestors. They were a charming people, quite illiterate, most of them, but all excellent talkers with an abundant and racy vocabulary. In spite of their complete lack of all the usual brands of knowledge they struck him as being possessed of that elemental wisdom which only comes to those who labour on the land—in some ways an altogether superior type to that of the neighbouring towns where educational facilities were abundant. From them he collected no fewer than 122 songs and ballads, all of which had originally been English folk-songs and which had been handed down to them from previous generations. An interesting example, surely, of the tenacity of tradition working under favourable conditions; *and*, what is more interesting, he found that though the tunes had been changed in almost every case, the words as often as not corresponded almost exactly with the home-country versions. What was still more important was the fine *quality* of these songs. But here let Sharp speak for himself:

The reason . . . why these mountain folk, albeit unlettered, have acquired so many of the essentials of country is partly to be attributed to the amount of leisure they enjoy . . . but

chiefly to the fact that they have one and all entered at birth into the full enjoyment of their racial heritage. Their language, wisdom and the many graces of life that are theirs, are merely racial attributes which have been gradually acquired and accumulated in past centuries and handed down generation by generation, each generation adding its quatum to that which it received. It must be remembered, too, that in their everyday life they are immune from that continuous, grinding, mental pressure, due to the attempt to "make a living", from which nearly all of us in the modern world suffer. Here no one is "on the make"; commercial competition and social rivalries are unknown.¹

What else is this but confirmation—word for word, almost,—of our whole argument? Community-living, absence of the acquisitive motive, oral transmission, ceaseless contact with the soil—everything which goes to make tradition is there. Impersonality too: Sharp was struck by the fact that the folk-singer "is never conscious of his audience . . . he never, therefore, strives after effect, nor endeavours in this or in any other way to attract the attention, much less the admiration of his hearers".²

While he was in America, Sharp took the opportunity of hearing folk-songs of a different type—those of the cow-boys. And this is where the story gains its point: for though these tunes and rhymes of the Middle West had an uproarious vigour he could not help remarking that, so far as quality was concerned, they were not to be compared with those he had heard in that outpost of Olde England high up among the Appalachians. Somehow the prairie songs lacked inner beauty and finesse. Why? Sharp himself volunteers the answer: "it can only be because the cowboy has been despoiled of his inheritance of traditional song; *he has nothing behind him.*"³

¹ *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians*: Olive Dame Campbell and Cecil Sharp, VII (Putnam, 1917).

² *Ibid.*, X.

³ *Ibid.*, XXI. (Italics mine.)

Unfortunately, *we* have nothing behind us either. Tradition is essentially a cumulative process: its welfare bound up with the welfare of the people. For this reason the folk-arts may be taken as the measure of the cultural wellbeing of any commonwealth. Apply that test, remembering what became of our folk-poetry in the post-Renaissance era and we can hardly fail to think that English culture has suffered.

We began this chapter by attempting to show that the peasantry were the last to be infected by the general decline in national morale: and, while it may be possible to argue that the condition of the lower sections of the rural class remained tolerably unimpaired, even up to 1750, it is no use pretending that the creative faculty was unaffected. As life grew ever more individualized it became self-conscious. Communalism as a human attitude was lost and with it went the habits of song and speech. Only in the remoter country districts were they retained. Folk-poetry had ceased to be productive but where it was free from the encroachments of "civilization" it maintained a stubborn life.

How stubborn we may judge from the following instance: while Bell was gathering material for his volume *Songs of the Peasantry*, published in 1840, he chanced to hear a gipsy girl singing what she called a Ballad of Queen Jane. Though he could not coax from her the complete poem, Bell heard enough to convince him of its authenticity and he included it in his collection. That he was right we may freely judge:

So black was the mourning
And white were the wands
Yellow, yellow the torches
They bore in their hands.

—the very lines seem heavy with doom. Yet the Queen they bury is Jane Seymour, who died in 1537, and presumably this poem must have been composed in one form or another at the same time, or thereabouts. Through how many millions of

mouths it must have passed in the four hundred years before it was first printed! Did Shakespeare know it, or Milton, Pope, Wordsworth or the young Tennyson? An interesting sidelight, surely, on the gulf between the people and the *littérateurs*.

Probably a considerable amount of mediaeval folk-poetry remained in currency throughout the eighteenth century, "floating among the vulgar": and in the nineteenth there was enough to keep the collectors busy before it dwindled away to nothing. After 1700, however, little or nothing was added to the existing capital and the new additions were, almost without exception, of a debased coinage. Mr. Iolo Williams, an authority in these matters, suggests that the reason for this is "that the change in English poetry which occurred about the year 1700 somehow reached even the peasant singers. If that were so, one might well expect the more delicate flowers of folk-poetry to disappear then, since the qualities of intellectualized emotion, which were often turned to noble poetry by the educated writers of the eighteenth century were totally unsuited to the peasant, who lacked all formal education. To put the matter in another way, whereas there may be some affinity between a song by Shakespeare ("It was a lover and his lass", let us say) and a folk-song, there is none between a folk-song and any of the nobler eighteenth-century poems, Collins's "Ode to Evening", Gray's "Elegy", or Pope's "Dying Christian to his Soul".¹

Surely this is to look at the problem from the wrong end. While it is true enough that the distinction between "official" and "folk" authorship was made more emphatic throughout the eighteenth century, it is necessary to keep in mind the fact that the former was no more than an offshoot from the English tradition. Scholarly literature could draw its sustenance from that main stream, but it could never really put anything back into it. Occasionally we find scraps of intellectualized material which have permeated through the various social strata until they reached down to the lowest level: but, generally speaking,

¹ *English Folk-Song and Dance*. P. 47.

where folk-poetry is concerned, there is no question of a *gesunkenes Kulturgut*.

But, it may be objected, "Is there any such thing as a genuine folk-poem? How does it come about? Why is it that we can never see one in the making?" Here again we must confess that a definition escapes us. By reading into the earlier ballads, however, it is easy enough to guess at some of the ways in which communal creation may have occurred. Probably there was always a place for individual authorship: but a place which was sooner or later shrouded in a veil of anonymity. Miss Evelyn Sharp has described ¹ how on one occasion she was present at what she believed to be the initiation of a brand-new folk-song. The occasion was a barn dance in one of the remoter parts of Ireland. During one of the intervals there was a pause in the proceedings: a man suddenly stood up and in a sing-song voice began to recite an improvised ballad—a highly-coloured account of some incident of recent, local interest. Miss Sharp may be right in thinking this a genuine case of peasant inspiration caught in the act, but the only way of proving it would be to return to the district and see what traces of its survival could be adduced to-day. For the people's poetry has ultimately only one criterion—popularity. Only when the work has been accepted by the community, turned over, transformed by additions and subtractions, often beyond recognition, can it be regarded as the genuine article; by which time, naturally, the circumstances of its creation are forgotten. Though his work soon becomes common property, the author asks, and gets, no recognition.

As Williams points out, "It never occurs to the listener to say, 'I wonder who wrote that?—which is almost the first thought that arises on hearing a song which is, in its present form, a deliberately-composed work of art.'" ² So slight is the imprint of individual style that the very effort to trace an author only leads the inquirer into such a network of vague associations

¹ *The Listener*: 1925.

² *English Folk-Song and Dance*.

as to make his research absurd. Thus Bell was quite confident in assigning the "Seeds of Love" to a certain Mrs. Habergam of Lancaster who died in 1703: but this did not prevent later authorities claiming it as the property of Northamptonshire, then of Sussex, then of Somerset. Bell *may* have been right (though the fact that he was so easily duped into accepting Clare's "Vanities of Life" as a genuine folk-poem goes hard against him), but he would have done better had he saved himself such endless labour to be wrong.

On the whole, we cannot do more than say that folk-poetry is poetry which happens to be current among the folk and leave it at that. Its sources are no more verifiable than those of the proverb ¹ or the nursery-rhyme with both of which it is closely akin.

As community life became the exception rather than the rule, it is easy to see why folk-poetry should have come to lead so precarious an existence. Having lost the matrix from which it was first generated, its appearances were increasingly confined to sporadic eruptions.

After 1700, instead of the pure strain which characterizes the mediaeval lyric we find a number of bastard, hybrid growths appearing. Folk-poetry continues: and one or two of the eighteenth-century songs are well enough, but the timbre is not the same. "God save the King", for example. No one knows where it came from: it is "a cento of familiar phrases strung together at some time when patriotic feeling ran high among the people", but we would be hard put to describe it as a spontaneous poetic utterance.

It was not only society which split up, either; form, too, showed many signs of disintegration. Folk-poetry was limited to the song. Even the country ballad had to be reduced to

¹ Here it is worth noting how the popular proverb tended to become erased from literature as the latter grew progressively more polite. Thus a proverbial element is strong in Chaucer's verse and in Shakespeare, but weak or altogether absent in the poetry of the Augustans. (Cf. Archer Taylor: *The Proverb*. P. 172. Harvard.)

song-length. There were no long poems. The reason? The requisite conditions and occasions for sustained expression no longer existed among the commonalty.

This absence of any major folk-poem is the measure of the failure to uphold the English tradition. It cannot be ascribed to any lack of natural capacity on the part of the peasantry, nor to the failure of folk-memory to retain oral work of more than miniature dimensions. Dr. Johnson thought that the fact that no manuscript could be produced was enough to disprove the authenticity of Ossian:

As there is no reason to suppose that the inhabitants of the Highlands and the Hebrides ever wrote their native language it is not to be credited that a long poem was preserved among them. If we had no evidence of the art of writing being practised in one of the counties of England we should not believe that a long poem was preserved there.

To which the obsequious Beauclerk added,

The ballad of Lilliburlero was once in the mouths of all the people of this country and is said to have had a great effect in bringing about the Revolution. Yet I question whether anybody can repeat it now; which shows how improbable it is that much poetry should be preserved by tradition,¹

—which shows, rather, that neither of them knew what they were talking about. (The fact that they were right in thinking Macpherson a fraud is no extenuation for their arguments.) They might have been less dogmatic if they had known more of the miracle of folk-memory,—of those descendants of the Pilgrim Fathers carrying on the English tradition in Virginia and Tennessee, of the still more remarkable case of the Jews who were expelled from the Peninsula in the fifteenth century

¹ Boswell's *Life*.

to be found, four centuries later, singing lengthy Spanish ballads in Rumania—reciting them, too, in the original accent!¹

Before we consider the ways in which it finally went to pieces, however, there are two branches of folk-song, the Carol and the Sea-Chanty, of which some account needs to be given. Not just to make our survey more compendious, but because the story of their rise, decline and fall provides a history-in-little of the fate of the popular cause.

First the Carol. In the beginning it was intimately connected with the movements of country dancing. This is the sense in which Robert Mannyng used the term in the thirteenth century, “Daunces, Caroles and somour games”,²—they were all one to him in promoting wickedness. We have previously attempted to show how its vocal counterpart, which eventually came to be regarded as the carol’s outward and visible sign, bore the imprint of bodily rhythm. As a formal dance the “Carole” did not survive the fifteenth century: it was transformed successively into the “Round”, the “Square” and the Elizabethan “Trenchmore”; but the simple carol-poem continued to lead an independent existence. Like the ballad, which it resembles so closely and in so many ways, the true carol always reflects the naiveties and subtleties of mediaeval poetic style. It retains the old alliterative emphases, the rough, stressed beat, all the vocal virtues of Saxon verse:

We are all lords’ and ladies’ sons
Born in our bower and hall
And thou art nothing but a poor maid’s child
Born in an ox’s stall.

In its treatment of sacred subjects it shows that same crude homeliness—and daring—which characterizes the miracle plays. Such a picture of the Christ Child as we get in “The Bitter Withy”, for instance,

¹ v. Alford and Gallop., op. cit., 20.

² *Handlyng Synn.*

So Mary mild fetched home her child
And laid him across her knee.
With a handful of green withy twigs
She gave him slashes three,

could only have been entertained by a peasant folk. And the occasional glory:

So he made him a bridge of the beams of the sun
And o'er the water crossed he

bespeaks the same origin.

The best of our English carols were composed in the period from 1400 to 1650. After the Restoration, the religious sincerity which had made them beautiful is missing; and instead of being joy-songs for any holy-day they take on their modern restricted meaning. Yet they continued to be sung by most country-folk; and it is a melancholy reflection on our national culture that, had it not been for the assiduous research of a few enthusiastic scholars, we should have lost our whole heritage of Christmas song. By the time Victoria came to the throne, carolling was a lost folk-art and it was only because one or two discriminating men, like Sandys and Gilbert, made it their business to search among the memories of the ancient inhabitants of villages, that we possess the few we have. Homer nods and even folk-memory grows weary. These song-poems retrieved by the collectors were, remember, at least two hundred years old, the majority much older. Here again 1700 seems to have been the critical turning point: thereafter folk-carols ceased and the printed-broadsheet was taken as substitute. One or two new ones were added in the course of the eighteenth century and proved themselves popular among the lower classes of rural society; but how lamentably changed—"mere eating-house songs about pork and pudding".¹

Next the Sea-Chanty. Like the Carol it was the by-product

¹ Vaughan Williams and Martin Shaw: *The Oxford Book of Carols*, Dearmer, XII. The Introduction to this volume is an absorbing account of the vicissitudes of English folk-poetry, written by experts steeped in traditional folk-lore.

of physical rhythm: with this important difference that it was the rhythm of work rather than of play. The Sea-Chanty was not always, as many imagine, a sea-song. It was suggested, rather, by the orderly exertions of dock-labourers hauling at a capstan (though it obtained, too, from the bursts of activity of sailors pulling in unison at the rigging ropes).

As a class, the Sea-Chanties represent one of the later developments of folk-song which is in itself a sufficient explanation of their lack of finer touch. The fact that the creative situation involved only a temporary, enforced community-sense and the fact that the participants shared only an animal-like heartiness may have had something to do with it also. Something at any rate is missing—delicacy, spirituality, a sense of deeper issues. Invariably they show a jovial vigour and honesty: one or two ("Shenandoah" and "I'll go no more a-rovin'", perhaps), are tinged with a bluff pathos and refinement; but for the most part they are lacking in mystery. Often the words are little better than singable gibberish: usually the tune is everything. Invariably they are marked by a strong feeling for rhythm. Inevitably the mighty efforts of mariners straining together found some sort of expression in a heavy emphasis, but it is the seaman's monstrous gait, a "roll ye bitch, roll" motion rather than the lithe grace and dancing lilt of the true lyric. Nor do the refrains serve any poetic purpose as they always do in the ballads: probably because their utterance was commanded and came at the chantyman's behest. All the gasps, the pauses and brutish recoveries of the rope-gang are branded on these refrains, but the result cannot be said to be in the nature of art. Between country folk-song and sea-chanty there is the same distinction as between artifex and artisan, freeman and slave. The one is the offspring of social joy, the other of teeth-gritting toil.

Sea-Chanties continued to be made until the 'seventies, when the clipper ships began to lose the blue riband and the cargoes that went with it. Many of the better-known ones are scarcely more than a century old. But, though it is common knowledge

that the Chanty went out with the sailing vessels, it is as well to remember also that it came in with them. As early as 1400 we read how

Anone the mastyr commaundeth fast
To hys shyp-men in all the hast
To dresse hem sone about the mast
Theyr takelyng to make.

With "How hissa!, then they cry
"What howte! mate, thou standest to nye
Thy fellow may nat hale the bye!"

—the modern equivalent to which, as David Bone very cogently points out, would be the docker's, "Hi!, stan' back, you! How th' hell can a man put weight on th' rope wi' you whispering in 'is bloody ear?"¹ (Here, as in every walk of life mechanization brought with it the voice of prose.) How is it, then, that the Sea-Chanty never developed into anything better?—and where are the sea-songs of yesteryear? The very fact that they were not transmitted through the ages seems to indicate that they were not regarded seriously, as being in the first flight of folk-poetry. One foot on land and one on sea, the sailor-man, for all his fine fellowship, was never quite constant. Ships changed, new riggings meant new forms of chorus, but whether it was the earlier short-haul bowline songs or the later halyard or capstan chanties, the results fell short of perfection. That, in itself, was sufficient reason for their not being preserved.

This is not to depreciate the Sea-Chanty: for itself it never pretended to be any better than it was. Fine qualities it had; but we cannot think that it had the virtues necessary for survival—and the enthusiasms and revivalist attempts which it has aroused seem only to indicate that the present-day public is less discriminating, more ready to accept a second-best product than of yore. The Chanty's voice is nothing if not reassured; it has a stentorian stridency, doggedness, good-humour, some-

¹ *Capstan Bars.* P. 31.

times a twinge of hard-bitten irony. Occasionally it tells a tale of sorts, as in "Lowlands" or "The Liverpool Song", which begins:

I joined on a bitter winter's mornin'
A-frapping of my arms to keep me warm
And the South cone aloisted for a warnin'
To stand by the makin' of a storm
—An' it's get ye back, ho!
Take in yer slack ho! etc.,

which, of course, leads us on to the hail-fellow verse of Kipling, Newbolt, Masfield and so many others.

In a word, the Sea-Chanties lacked the right kind of discipline. The relationship between words and music was too arbitrary or too lax: usually there was no set time at all and the solo-chantyman was left free (too free) to fill the intervals with renderings of his own. The effect produced was that of a series of starts and stops, not a continuous flow: with the result that the general effect of the words was dispersed and fragmentary. The trouble with the Sea-Chanties,—paradoxical as it may sound,—was that they were not adequately braced.

The root of the trouble was not so much that the folk-genius had become entirely barren as that it had come to be so fissiparous. Prevented from realizing itself in any sizable form, it nevertheless continued to throw off its minutiae—bits and pieces of rhyme. Trifling as it is, this literature is by no means inconsiderable. Has anyone, for instance, made a thorough study of nursery-rhyme, or completed an anthology of the rhymed weather-wisdom which even now is still current among country-folk?

To the town-dweller weather remains a convenient topic for railway-carriage conversation, but for the land-worker it has always meant a great deal more: often his livelihood has depended on his ability to read the wind and make his calculations from the sky's data. The steam-ship was fatal to the Sea-Chanty, but the introduction of meteorological reports has

not, apparently, killed the farmer's trust in the traditional weather-lore, nor his love of well-known mnemonic tags—

Red sky in the morning
Is the sailor's warning

and all the rest. And so say all of us. Whether we believe in them or not is another matter; we go on repeating them (—and Shakespeare with us:

A red morn that ever yet betokened
Wreck to the seaman, tempest to the field.)

It would be difficult to make a comprehensive survey of such fragments as these, but a glance is enough to show how extensive they are. Recollect only a few of the soothsayings which mark a single month of the country calendar:

March dry, good rye
March wet, good wheat

(concise, true)—or

March sun
Lets snow stand on t' stone

(more picturesque)—or that other verse which, in one form or another, turns up in every county,

March borrowed from Averil
Three days and they were ill.
The one was sleet and the other was snow
And the third was the worst that e'er did blow,

—or (more lyrical than meaningful)

A peck of March dust
And a shower of May
Makes the corn green
And the fields gay,

—or this, from Northumberland (—real poetry surely?),

March yeans the lammie
And buds the thorn
And blows through the flint
of an ox's horn.

There is enough here to remind us how strong the love of rhyme remains among country folk.

It might be hard to say just how much of it is purely and simply of the folk. Such apophthegms as

When the cuckoo comes to the bare thorn
Sell your cow and buy your corn

and

Mackerel skies and mare's tails
Make loftie ships carry low sails,

might almost have come from Tusser himself. Folk-lore was never entirely neglected by the book-trade, nor uninfluenced by it: indeed we suspect that Tottel's publication of the *Hundred Poyntes of Good Husbandrye* in 1557 had even more far-reaching effects among the masses than his more famous *Miscellany* of 1559 which did so much to prepare the way for Spenser and so change the fortunes of the official poets. Such works as *The Country Almanack* (1676), and *Poor Robin's Almanack* (1733), catered for lowly, less imaginative tastes, and though of slight or negligible worth, they may have helped somewhat to keep alive the love of rhyme. (The work of the scholars, Ray's *Collection of English Proverbs*, 1670, and the later investigations of such men as Swainson, Inwards and Lean, (not forgetting that most eccentric of all Erasmus's studies, the *Collectana Adagiorum* (1500), were exclusively academic and do not concern us.)

In the main, however, these shreds are interesting as evidence of the continuance of a vast unwritten literature. The folk-poem proper did not survive the Industrial Revolution. One or two of the finer ones—"The Cuckoo" and such half-mystical things as "John Barleycorn", "The Unquiet Grave" and "The Seeds of Love,"

I sowed the seeds of love
That blossom in the Spring
In April, May and likewise June
When the small birds sweetly sing,

would in all probability have come down to us in any case: but almost everything else would have been lost irretrievably if it had not been for the last-minute efforts of the collectors. Many of the more popular ones were found recurring in widely scattered localities, carried, chiefly, by tramps and gipsies;¹ but there is no doubt that they had ceased to hold any real appeal and that they were in grave danger of being forgotten. After 1800 their freshness was beginning to be effaced: they had ceased to have any living meaning and so the old-fangled words suffered from thoughtless iteration. As the creative impulse failed, indifference increased—the verses furred over as memory ceased to regard them as being of importance. The younger, more sophisticated generations heard only an antediluvian jingle: until at last the most venerable folk-singer grew rather ashamed of his song, and desisted.

Only in the more inaccessible districts, particularly in the wilder dales of Northern England, was folk-poetry retained with anything like the old affection. The fearful “Lyke-wake Dirge” was being chanted over Cleveland death-beds long after

¹ Even those folk-songs which seem to proclaim themselves peculiar to a particular locality have an uncanny habit of turning up elsewhere. “Widdicomb Fair”, for instance: on the face of it the song “belongs” to Devon, yet variants of it are found in several counties (—and Tom Copley, they say, was a Somerset man). Folk-song had ways of becoming ubiquitous long before words were printed or wireless invented. Community singing meant something more—and better—than it does to-day. It was shared by English and Scots alike. We have noted the use Burns made of it: “My love is like a red, red rose”, may have been based on some Ayrshire version, but it is worth while remembering that English counterparts existed also. One of them, “The True Lover’s Farewell”, is printed in *Folk-Songs from Somerset* (ed. Sharp and Marson) and ends:

O fare ye well, my own true love
And fare you well for a while
But wherever I go I will return
If I row ten thousand mile, my dear
If I row ten thousand mile.

As if this was not enough, the parallelism is further maintained in the lines

The rivers they shall all run dry
The rocks melt with the sun. . . .

(lines which for years we have so often praised as manifesting Burns’s individual genius!).

the time when Sir Walter Scott elevated it to literary status by including in his *Border Minstrelsy*.¹ The country of the broad acres, of grey fells and windy moorlands, became in the nineteenth century, one of the last refuges of the English tradition. There, if nowhere else, the primitive attitude of mind and the poetry that accompanied it, was still not lost. How primitive we may judge from this antidote for sores:

Tak tweea 'at's red an' yan' 'at's blake
O' poison berries three
Three fresh cul'd blooms o' devil's-glut
An' a sprig o' rosemary:
Take henbane, bullace, hummlekite
An' t' fluff frev a deead bulrush
Naan berries shak frae t' rowan tree
An' naan frae t' bottery bush.²

Compare this with any of the charms of Anglo-Saxon poetry (for argument's sake, say, the one quoted in the first chapter of this book).³ Is it not essentially at one with it? How seriously the belief in magic was entertained even as late as the nineteenth century may be guessed by the numbers of curse-rhymes still extant:

Fire come, fire gan
Curlin' smeake keep oot o' t' pan.
There's a toad i' t' fire, a frog on t' hob
Here's t' heart frev a crimson ask
Here's a tooth from the head
O' yan 'at's dead. . . .⁴

—maybe not pretty, but in language that is far from impotent. Indeed, the more one studies this poetry of northern superstition the nearer one feels to the Saxon and the mediaeval world. It ends where it had begun. Darkness and foreboding remain. Wyrd abides.

¹ Cf. R. Blakeborough: *Wit, Character, Folklore and Customs of the N. Riding*. P. 123. (Frowde, 1898.)

² From *Yorkshire Dialect Poems and Traditional Poems*: ed. F. W. Moorman. P. 128.

³ *Infra*. P. 6.

⁴ R. Blakeborough: *Op. cit.* p. 169.

Perhaps the most notable achievement of this kind is "A Dree Neet", a poem which deserves a wider circulation than it has enjoyed hitherto. Its subject was one which always appealed to the peasant, the sending to Hell of that best-hated of men, the squire. Not a single sinister omen is omitted: the agony is piled on with such ghoulis, fiendish glee that the final effect is almost overpowering:

T'were a dree neet, a dree neet for a soul to gan away
 A dree neet, a dree neet, but a gannin soul can't stay
 An' t' Gabriel ratchets yelp'd aboon, a gannin' soul to chill . . .
 Nea dove has settled on his sill, but a flittermoose that neet
 Cam thrice times thro his casement an' flackered roond his feet
 An' thrice times did the raven croak, an' t' samelike thrice cam't hoot
 Fra t' howlet's tree: doon chimleys three there cam a shroud o' soot
 An' round t' candle tweea times there cam a dark-winged moth to
 t' leet
 But t' third it swirl'd reet into t' flame where gans his soul this neet
 T'were a dree neet, a dree neet, for yan too late to pray
 A dree neet, a dree neet, but a gannin' soul can't stay.¹

Not even in "Christabel" is the darksome horror so sustained, though we may suppose that it was this kind of verse that Coleridge (—and for that matter Chatterton, Keats and Scott) had in mind when he sought a supernatural effect. In "Christabel", however, that effect is *reproduced*: here, surely, it is the real thing.

But is "A Dree Neet" genuine folk-poetry? It appeared first in *T'Hunt o' Yatton Brigg*, itself an original work composed by the Yorkshire dialect-poet, Richard Blakeborough. The circumstances of its publication may raise some doubts as to its authenticity: and certainly in its printed form it shows signs of retouching. Yet, in printing it, Blakeborough was careful to indicate where lines had been lost, nor did he attempt to interpolate anything of his own: and at the conclusion adds, "The above lines were known in 1750". We need not doubt

¹ R. Blakeborough: *T'Hunt o' Yatton Brigg* (published by the author). Pp. 35-7.

his word. "A Dree Neet", quite as much as the "Lyke-wake Dirge", shows all the marks of folk-authorship. With its phantoms drawing near to mock the dying man "frae t'other side o' t' grave" (—kinfolk of Tiresias and Elpenor?), it might almost be the last gasp of the native epic. In its intense and unrelieved melancholy it shows itself to be in line with the Nordic tradition, the line which began with "Deor's Lament" and "Widsith" and continued in the tragic ballads. Popular poetry is usually thought of as being cheerful and lightsome: very often it is, but it is as well to remind ourselves of this more sombre side to its nature. The meanest peasant was far from being incapable of high-seriousness.

It was, indeed, in the unconscious deeps of primitive mind that the finest seeds of folk-poetry took root. We have previously noted a connection between witchcraft and word-craft, the literal magic of rhyme: but more remains to be said concerning the inspiration of Fear. The more superstitious the folk, it seems, the more poetical. At the opening of the last century English country-folk as a class were still darkly emotional: evil inhered in inanimate things, rites were venerated, and a noise in the night had power to strike chill into the hearts of those who were certainly not "nervous". A hen that crowed or a whistling girl were more than ominous: or, as the jingle has it,

Than own a crawling hen
 I sooner wad t' aud divil meet
 Hickety, O pickety, O pompolorum jig
 Or breed a whistling lass
 I sooner wad t' aud divil treet
 Hickety, O pickety, O pompolorum jig.
 Naught but ill-luck 'll fester where
 There craws and whistles sic a pair,
 May hens and women breed na mare
 Pompolorum jig.¹

¹ Quoted by Blakeborough: *Wit, Character, Folk-lore and Customs*. Pp. 126-7. The refrain ("Hickety, O pickety, O pompolorum jig"), or something like it, is still current among North Country children. My wife, who was brought up in London, remembers it as the accompaniment of a ball-game.

Which sounds rollicking enough; yet it comes from a mind oppressed with forebodings which more sophisticated minds can scarcely suspect. For the Saxon, we said, words were amulets against Fate, and for the majority of villagers their usefulness in that capacity remained. Probably most country-folk hung on to their rhymes (precautionary verses) for much the same reason that some of us continue to throw salt over our shoulders.

It may readily be understood why the traditional forms should have lingered longer among the dales folk than anywhere else in England. There the old culture was retained and rhyme remained the first, not the last resort, on every occasion. From Collins to Yeats, our book-poets have felt the attraction of this semi-pagan superstitious culture, of life in wild and lonely places; and have striven to regenerate their inspiration by tapping it.

Education soon put an end to all this. Enlightenment, whatever benefits it conferred in other directions, only served to remove the haunting mystery. Darkness was gone; and with it folk-poetry faded into the light of common day.

Throughout the nineteenth century rural life underwent vast changes. Blakeborough who knew the village folk of the North Riding, as intimately as any man, was struck by their insistence that farming (and everything for which it stood) had altered beyond recognition in their lifetimes. He could not help remarking their sense of appalling loss. "Nowt's t' same", one of them told him sadly. There was much more to this than the usual disgruntlement of old age: it was the end of an era. A death had occurred.

Until 1850 many country districts still had their minstrels, recognized custodians of the heritage of verse-narratives and songs. Such a one was Francis King of Rylstone, the Skipton Minstrel, who died in 1844. According to those who had heard him, he was no "mere player of jigs and country dances, but a singer of heroic ballads, carrying his hearers back to the

days of chivalry and royal adventure".¹ Another was Billy Bolton, the Singer of Littondale—knife-grinder, conjuror, preacher, popular-educator and reciter. It was his custom to preface his entertainment with some sleight-of-hand and a few choice remarks on the follies of superstition, but all this was only by way of overture, the ballad was the thing. He accompanied himself on the pipes and intoned "*with proper emphasis and correct pronunciation*", with such effect that the listeners hung on his every word.

In a sense, these itinerant singers were the last representatives of a profession which once included Norse skalds, Norman jocalatores and troubadours; but their function had changed. They acted as trustees of the folk-poetry which had been handed down to them for safe-keeping, but they no longer added anything to it. The tales they told were the old ones of Kings and Knights and Castles, but though the mediaeval theme remained the favourite of the people, the ability to add to it was no longer there.

Folk-poetry was falling into disrepute among the younger generations. Retreating to the remoter valleys, it became more and more infertile, as every species tends to do when faced with approaching extinction. Recitation, once the usual thing in every farmhouse, now became a pastime for old fogeys only. In "T' Hunt o' Yatton Brigg" there is a poem more than 100 lines in length "recited to the author by Mr. J. Fossick of Carthorpe when turned 80 years of age". How many octogenarians of the twentieth century could repeat as much?

There were, of course, a host of dialect-poets who did their best to supply the lacuna left by an effete minstrelsy. These, though they were appreciated in their own localities, could never reach a wider audience. The King's English was not alone in preventing them. Ever since the Tudor period the English dialect poet has continued to be without honour save in his own little country. Even if we restrict ourself for the

¹ Bell: *Songs of the Peasantry*. P. 72.

moment to a single county (Yorkshire) the list of these inglorious Miltons is a considerable one. Ebenezer Elliott has his place in literary histories, but who ever heard of John Castillo, the Cleveland stone-mason, Ben Preston of Airedale, or John Tate, the Pocklington Poet? Peasants all, and as honest as writers are made. Some qualities of mind they possessed for which many a romantic genius pined. They can all tell a good tale. Castillo's "Lucky Dream", for example. It relates how a certain resident of Sealholm Hall, in the neighbourhood of Whitby was troubled with a curious dream and how:

For three neets runnin' t'were the seame
That if on Lunnon Brig he stood,
He'd hear some news would dee him good.
He laboured hard, bathe neet an' day
Tryin' to drave those thowts away;
Yet daily grew mair discontent
Till he at last to Lunnon went.
Being quite a stranger to that toon
Lang taame he wander'd up an' doon
Till, led by some mysterious hand,
On Lunnon Brig he teak his stand.
An' there he waited, day by day,
An' just were boun' to coom away,
Sea mich he thowt he were to bleame
To gang sea far about a dream,
When thus a man, as he drew near
Did say: "Good friend, what seek you here
Where I have seen you soon and later?"
His dream tiv him he did relate.
"Dreams", says the man, "are empty things
Mere thoughts that flit on silver'd wings:
Unheeded we should let them pass.
I've had a dream, and thus it was
That somewhere round this peopled Ball
There's such a place as Sealholm Hall;
Yet whether such a place there be
Or not, is all unknown to me.
There in a cellar dark and deep,
Where slimy creatures nightly creep

And human footsteps never tread,
 There is a store of treasure hid.
 If it be so, I have no doubt
 Some lucky wight will find it out.
 Yet so or not t'is nought to me
 For I shall ne'er go there to see."
 The man did slyly twice or thrice
 The Cockney thenk for his advice;
 Then heame agean withoot delay
 He cherfully did take his way
 An' set aboot the wark, an' sped
 Fund ivvery thing as t' man had said;
 Were ivver after seen to flourish
 T' faanest gentleman iv all t' parish.
 Folks wonder'd sair, an' well they might
 Wheer he gat all his guineas bright.
 If it were true, i' spite o' fame
 Tiv him it were a lucky dream."¹

The story, of course, is not original. It is a local variant of a familiar folk-tale, the earliest known version of which is to be found in the works of the thirteenth century Persian poet Salalu'd-Din. This fact, together with the impersonality of its style and its economy of language, are enough to prove its lineage.

These village minstrels are careful never to obtrude. If they reach no great heights that is because they never indulge in fictitious raptures. If they seem ordinary, unremarkable, it is because they invariably aim at the least common denominator of emotion and meaning.

Often, too, the dialect poets developed verse-forms of their own. The Dialogue, for instance. It was not unknown in Old English. As the *débat* it grew more popular after the Conquest and, being semi-dramatic, developed in various ways—into Interlude, Morality and the Drama proper. Even Spenser's "Shepherd's Calendar" was largely written in this question-and-answer fashion, but after 1600 the form prac-

¹ *Yorkshire Dialect Poems*. Pp. 34-5.

tically disappeared from the works of the better-known poets. It remained popular among country people long after it had been officially discredited, however, and the dialect-poet continued to find a use for it. As a medium it was primarily *human*, readily understandable, given to realism, allowing of a shrewd and vigorous use of homely speech. Time was when the printing-presses of every market-town issued verse-dialogue broadsheets—for the publishing trade was very far from being centralized in London as it is to-day. It was a common thing, apparently, for ballads and dialogues of this kind to be displayed in ale-house parlours. One of the earliest, "A Yorkshire Dialogue between an Awd Wife, a Lass, and a Butcher", was printed at York as early as 1673. Professor Moorman says of it:

It appeared just a thousand years after Cædmon had sung the Creator's praise in Whitby Abbey, and its dialect is that of north-east Yorkshire—in other words, the lineal descendant of that speech which was used by Cædmon in the seventh century, by Richard Rolle in the fourteenth, and which may be heard to this day in the streets of Whitby and among the hamlets of the Cleveland Hills.¹

No better proof of the carry-over of the mediaeval influence and of the slight effect which Renaissance and Reformation had upon popular poetry, could be adduced. It remained, as ever, oral.

We may suspect, too, that the local dialogue-poem often tended to become dramatic and in much the same way as it had done in the Middle English period. Such a work as the Mell Supper Act, which probably dates from the close of the eighteenth century, though it takes the form of a dialogue between Polly and the Squire, is nothing more nor less than an Interlude. (The Mell Supper was a "treat" given to farm-workers at the close of harvest, and the dialogue seems to have

¹ *Yorkshire Dialect Poems*: Introduction, pp. xxi-xxii.

been part of the entertainment.)¹ It is not quite true, then, to say that "the Mummers' Play is the *only* survival of pre-Reformation folk-drama".²

By 1850 folk-poetry had ceased to possess the coherence necessary for its continuance as a living heritage. Education and industrialization, the emergence of Received Standard English, the increasing complications and uncertainties of work on the land, the decay of rural life—all conspired to kill it. From then on the scholarly collector took charge. The work of salvage was begun.

The story of that work makes interesting reading. The chain of lucky accidents which led to several of our finest songs and ballads being rescued from oblivion, often in the nick of time, has to be read to be believed. We could follow it with more enthusiasm, however, if we thought that the tradition had itself been saved by such exertions. Much as we owe to the collectors, it is impossible not to feel that by constantly picking the memories of the peasantry they hastened the final extinction of the natural impulse of folk-poetry. Granted, that impulse was so enfeebled as to be comatic, it would probably have succumbed in any case: but it is a melancholy thought that the enthusiast's eagerness to be in at the kill (transcribing the last, unwilling death-bed confessions), may have helped to stifle what little life there was remaining.

Nor can we place much hope in revivalist attempts. That the rediscovery of our native folk-song helped to provide new material and fresh inspiration for English music may be true enough: in a sense it gave it a new lease of life. On the Continent, composers of the calibre of Grieg, Dvořák, Smetana, Granados or Sibelius drew their strength directly from a national folk-tradition: and, to be sure, we have our own Vaughan-Williams. But where are the counterparts of these men among

¹ The Mell Supper Act is printed in the *Publications of the Folk-lore Soc.*, XLV (1899).

² Cf. G. Long: *Folk-lore Calendar*. P. 219.

our poets? The disparity between popular and individualist art was evidently more serious in poetry than it was in music. Song, by its very nature, remained vocal: but verse, in its translation to the printed page, had somehow become denatured. In its desire to titillate his intellect rather than satisfy his urge to "mouthe with mannes face", poetry had taken on a two-fold responsibility. And in doing so it had lost something of its general appeal.

Nevertheless there are still those who think that it is still not too late for the twentieth-century poet to avail himself of a posthumous legacy. Folk-plays have been revived (always a little self-consciously): and before the war the morris-dance nearly became a narrow cult for "county" folk. . . . More promising is the repopularization of some of the best folk-poems in the schools. Such a book as Methuen's *Poetry Speaking Anthology* for example, is composed very largely of anonymous verse and is doing valuable work among juniors. If there were more anthologies of this kind, if poetry-teaching were conceived from the nursery years as a social game, the "gift of joy", —as activity—instead of as formal appreciation or forced learning by heart, then there might yet come from the seeds a new and vigorous growth of folk-poetry.

Before that can happen, however, there will need to be vast sociological changes involving a reassertion, doubtless in forms different from any yet experienced, of the community spirit. The old folk-poetry is dead, its last vestiges preserved like dried flowers between the covers of antiquarians' tomes. Its fragrance remains, but the life it knew is irretrievable. The modern poet may examine it, but only with the cold detachment of a scientist scrutinizing a museum specimen: he cannot enter into the life of it nor take it as an example.

"Seeing that the death was so inevitable, why regret it?" Admittedly there is more of sentimentalism than realism in most retrospects: and it is best to let the dead bury the dead; but for all that, the conviction remains that an abysmal loss

has been incurred. The gap between literature and the people remains, as wide now as ever. Never was the poet more completely intellectualized, more concerned with proving his own cleverness, than to-day. Was he ever less popular, in the true sense of the word? Whichever way we look at the problem, we cannot dismiss the thought that since the germ of all music lies in folk-song, something more durable should have grown from our English folk-poetry.

Death or eclipse, we cannot but regret what happened—the failure of the oral tradition to establish itself in any recognizable form. With all its faults (and often it is only by its defects that it can safely be identified), this rustic literature always possessed the virtue of a universal appeal. It spoke of a charmed, visionary world in which, however faintly, the horns of elfland might still be heard. Whether its subject was festive song or eerie fetish it presented the truth without comment; impressive most when it was most simple.

CHAPTER VIII

THE URBAN MUSE

THE poetry of the peasantry is dead. That it died hard we have seen: even to-day it refuses to admit extinction. The Mummers' Plays, each with its prehistoric medicine man, its atavistic memorials of Iron Age cult, persist in one or two localities, chiefly south of the Thames. At this late hour in our history it is still not wholly true to say that the Hobby-horse is forgotten.

Usually we are too apt to take our modernism for granted, forgetting that the effects of civilization in us are as yet but superficial—that in our make-up primitive, Christian and materialist-intellectual elements are often juxtaposed without really being fused. Sometimes they contradict each other, but as they are so cunningly compartmented in our minds we are not often aware of conflict: rather do we tend to accept the newer aspects of our consciousness as being necessary and true simply because the older aspects are overlain. In a few trifling decades life in this country has undergone some startling changes. Technological advances, in particular, have made us susceptible to a variety of novel influences. Broadcasting, for instance, is a matter of youngest memory: compulsory education was introduced recently enough as not to affect many who are still alive; and even industrialization is little more than a century old. So that, though the country folk-song no longer lives and the great masses seem to have lost all knack and need for poetry, it is impossible to believe that the original impulses have been entirely stifled. The energies of the English tradition may have been dissipated in the proliferation of urban life: but they are still there . . . somewhere.

When the countryfolk forsook the land and were swallowed

up in the mushroom cities of the nineteenth century they did not immediately forget old customs and rural traits. Thus the new artisans of Manchester kept their Greenside Wakes Song. Rochdale had its Pace-egg Play each Easter. Durham miners continued to perform the mystic, pagan Sword Dance. Londoners attended the annual Highgate Swearing-in Ceremony and the revels at Fairlop Oak. Each and all of these occasions preserved its appropriate rhyme. It was some time before the old folk-songs lost favour entirely: indeed, it is not so very long since the Ballad of Robin Hood and the Pedlar was recovered from the lips of an old lady living in Bermondsey (of all places).

Here and there in the great industrial centres of the North there were rhymesters who knew the value of a rollicking song and who, with boisterous good humour, endeavoured to retain something of the minstrel's mannerisms. Men like Abel Bywater with his "Sheffield Cutlers' Song":

Coom all you cutlin' heroes, where'ersome'er you be,
 All you that works at flat-backs, coom listen unto me;
 A basketful for a shillin'
 To mak 'em we are willin',
 Or swap 'em for red herrin's, aar bellies to be fillin'
 Or swap 'em for red herrin's, aar bellies to be fillin'.
 A basketful o' flat-backs, I'm sure we'll mak, or more
 To ger reight into t' gallery wheer we can rant an roar
 Throw flat-backs, stones an' sticks
 Red herrin's, bones an' bricks,
 If they don't play "Nancy's fancy", or onny tune we fix
 We'll do the best that e'er we can to break some o' their necks.

Apart from an undeniable virility in its turn of rhythm, verse of this calibre is interesting only in so far as it reveals the rawness of working-class mentality of the thirties of last century.

For the most part, however, popular poetry was transferred to the chap-book and halfpenny broadside literature and by the opening of the Victorian era had been transformed almost beyond recognition by the addition of new and foreign elements.

How extensive this proletariat literature was and how greedily accepted is too often forgotten. All over the country, as if in lieu of newspapers, printing-presses turned out a regular supply of verse which was hawked about the towns by professional patterers and ballad-singers. Most of it was doggerel of the lowest kind, as might be expected, but that is really irrelevant—the important fact is that a love of spoken rhyme continued to be a characteristic of the uneducated multitudes.

Not all these street-ballads were quite worthless, either. In 1946 we read a gimcrack headline and a few dry sentences concerning a pit disaster. In 1846 the theme received a somewhat loftier treatment: the news was announced in a special broadsheet, hastily composed, as hastily composited and issued with the print scarcely dry—"Fearful Colliery Explosion in Scotland".

A dreadful and heartrending sight
In Scotland has been seen
Where far away from friends and light
Poor men destroyed have been,
When working down beneath the ground
Toiling for their bread
About two hundred living souls
Were numbered with the dead.

* * * *

Hundreds stood around the pit
In solemn silence there,
By the winter's sun each face was lit
But only show'd despair,
Mourning for some missing one
They never more would see
Until the pathway they have trod
Of dark eternity.¹

Nothing very brilliant, admittedly, but it is pleasant to think of the effect produced on those who heard (and repeated) it: superior in every way, surely, to our present-day appraisal of such events? The terse forthrightness of the traditional ballad

¹ *Victorian Street Ballads*, ed. W. Henderson. P. 45.

style, its impersonal bleakness, its naivety and simple good faith—it is still there. Not, however, in the “Dreadful Accident this day on the Ice in Regent’s Park”, which ends:

For the ice gave way, the people lined the shore
 Upwards of fifty sank to rise no more.
 In Regent’s Park O hear those dreadful cries
 They sank this Tuesday never more to rise.¹

We smile, it is so pathetic, but those who bought a copy may have thought it not without pathos. Just as they accepted the crude, irrelevant woodcuts (the “picture on top on’t” as Falstaff called it) and the lurid, conglomerate type, so they were not critically perturbed by incongruities of style or sentiment. Spelling and grammatical errors, rhymes that were no rhymes at all, irregularities of rhythm abounded: the public’s taste was omnivorous rather than fastidious.

In London the main centre of this flourishing industry was Seven Dials. Its organizing head was a certain “Jemmy” Catnach, a Newcastle man who set up a printing house at No. 2 Monmouth Street in 1813. Several of his employees, Disley, Fortey and Taylor, later launched out on their own accounts and became his rivals in business and his successors, but for a quarter of a century Catnach remained the presiding genius of the new industry of mass-produced verse. So successful he was that at the age of forty-seven he was able to retire with a considerable fortune, and the amount of material which passed through his hands, during the years in which he did business, is beyond calculation. The following is an extract from his accounts:

Of Rush’s murder	.	.	2,500,000	copies
Of the Mannings	.	.	2,500,000	”
Of Courvoisier	.	.	1,660,000	”
Of Greenacre	.	.	1,600,000	”
Of Corder	.	.	1,660,000	” ²

¹ Quoted in “The Poetry of Seven Dials”, *Quarterly Review*, 1867.

² *Quarterly Review*, 1867.

—an amazing commentary, certainly, on what is usually regarded as an illiterate age. Even allowing for the fact that the ballads were issued to the street-patterers at the rate of threepence per dozen, the turnover in each case must have been considerable.

Catnach employed from a dozen to twenty hack writers at a time, capable, between them, of supplying any need, however urgent. As often as not these drudges were author, minstrel and salesman combined. "I gets a shilling a copy for my verses besides what I can make by selling 'em", one of them confided to an inquirer.¹

The Catnach Press was nothing if not catholic in its provisions: everything and anything came within its indiscriminate net; ballads of famous men, ballads of historical events, ballads of topical incidents, ballads in sob-stuff vein, political diatribes . . . pirated versions of poems by Burns, Wordsworth, Byron, Campbell or Moore . . . reissues of old favourites ("Drink to me only with thine eyes" complete with caricature portrait of a toper worthy of Rowlandson) . . . corrupt versions of traditional ballads even, "Sir Patrick Spans", "Helen o' Kirkconnel" and "Lord Bateman". But it was always the gallows ballad which brought in the most profitable returns. "The Last Moments of A. Dalmás", "Execution of Alice Holt", "Shocking Rape and Murder"—titles of this kind were sure winners. The *News of the World* was not the first to realize the commercial possibilities of an execution or to cater for the grimmer, more sordid side of popular taste. And yet how remarkably close many of these cheap rhymes were to the original ballad style! Listen, for a moment, to one of these decrepit ballad-singers as he tries to palm off his tale of "The Cruel Gamekeeper":

He ripp'd her up and there was by
A baby in her womb did try.
He then did hide her among some thorns,
The baby crawled into her arms.

¹ Loc. cit.

Somebody hearing her to cry
 There they went immediately
 And found them hid among some thorns
 The baby crawling in her arms.

They took the keeper before it was long
 And bound him in a prison strong
 And he was soon condemned to die
 All on the gallows tree so high.

With its repetitions, its stock-phrases and conventional mannerisms this might almost pass as belonging to the sixteenth century.

After 1820 the law insisted on a decent interval between verdict and execution: "Before that", as one of these street-patterers pointed out "there wasn't no time for lamentation—sentence to-day, scragging to-morrow or leastways Friday to Monday".¹ The interim for grace was good for trade: and all the complicated machinery of Seven Dials worked night and day to keep pace with the demand. Last-minute repentances and noose-confessions sold quicker than hot cakes, especially in Newgate and on the fatal morning. The ballad "of Corder", mentioned above, referred, no doubt, to the "Last Dying Speech and Confession" (Official!, Special!) of William Corder, murderer of Maria Marten. To-day we are still eager enough for gruesome and sensational details, to learn the last dire intimacies of the hangman's secret—but we are satisfied with prose apparently, the press-account and detective novel.

At times good murders were few and far between, and though Catnach and his cronies made the most of them when they occurred, they were not to be relied on as a staple in trade. There were always stock lines on which to fall back, however—a suicide or a fire, a workers' strike or, for want of any better occasion, some detail of low-life served up anew and given a catching title. Whatever other qualities he missed, the

¹ Sir Henry Mayhew: *London Labour and the London Poor* (1862).

ballad-monger was never lacking in energy or indefatigability.
Even folk-song was raided,

“And has he broke his faith?”, she sighed,
The faith he pledged to me;
Come back again, thou truant one,
From the false and hollow sea.”¹

Under his cloak of anonymity, the hand-to-mouth author was free to plagiarize to his heart's content, to perpetrate the wildest excesses of style, the wildest mud-slinging speech—“the language really used by men” in their less-guarded moments. Yet though much of this guttersnipe verse was shocking enough it rarely stooped to pruriency. Its indecencies were never entirely inexcusable, its vulgarities never nasty: it dealt largely with wickedness and vice, of crime and disaster, but it did so in an honest, if matter-of-fact fashion, with an unfailing sympathy for human failure and frailty. If ever there was a poetry of the common man surely it was this! Often it was openly, truculently socialistic, denouncing the oppression of reactionary governments in no uncertain terms. When a well-known corn warehouse caught fire, for instance, the broadside news-sheet concluded with this wry moral:

Now pray God bless us one and all
And send the price of bread may fall
That the poor with plenty may abound
Tho' the Albion Mill's burnt to the ground.²

The House of Catnach & Company was very far from Spenser's “Prince's Pallace”, a sort of Fagin's den in which the slummiest of poetasters dossed; but even so a genuine clearing-house for the emotions and aspirations of the teeming, striving millions.

In many ways this poetry of back-streets and unsavoury alleyways was quite frighteningly democratic. Nothing, it seems, was too sacred for it to touch. Even the Royal Family

¹ From “She parted with her lover” (*Victorian Street Ballads*. P. 80).

² *Ibid.* P. 139.

was not immune. We are still apt to think of the Victorians as 'being very prim and proper, stiff-starched. No doubt the middle-classes were; but is there anyone nowadays who would not be embarrassed (or his modesty taken unawares) by such an effusion as "Queen Victoria's Baby"?

Then there was great bustle, confusion, and hurry,
The Queen was in labour—the Prince in a flurry;
When the Princess was born the nurse loud did shout—
"Little girl, does your mother know you're out?"

(*Chorus:*) Oh, oh! little baby, the dear little baby—
Queen Victoria's baby

Now the Queen has recovered, and Albert's the nurse
He puts on the child's napkins, and don't care a curse ¹
etc., etc.,

—or this (from "Lovely Albert"),

Last Monday night, all in a fright
Al out of bed did tumble,
The German lad was raving mad
How he did groan and grumble;
He cried to Vic, I'll cut my stick,
To St. Petersburg go right slap,
When Vic, 'tis said, jumped out of bed
And wopped him with her nightcap.²

Miching mallecho. And yet the twentieth century prides itself upon its freedom from inhibition!

It is not to be supposed that any writer working under such conditions should ever have attained any artistic or technical success. The work involved was always of the made-to-order, slapdash variety and the pay too beggarly for self-respecting authors to stoop so low in their profession as to undertake it. But that is not the point: we have not dragged these doggerel rhymes from the oblivion into which they had so rightly fallen, merely to uphold them as creditable examples of popular verse

¹ From "She parted with her lover" (*Victorian Street Ballads*. P. 144).

² *Ibid.* P. 149.

(which they are not), nor to pretend that they are any better than they are. The main point in mentioning them at all is this: that they supply indisputable evidence that some sort of taste for poetry is (or until very recently *was*) universal—that poetry, to put it bluntly, can be a commercial proposition. In other words, the separation which gradually developed, as we have seen, between Poetry and the People, was not entirely due to any lack of sympathy on the part of the latter. As a Victorian critic very rightly pointed out,

The thousands who now buy these halfpenny ballads . . . would rise to better taste and the appreciation of higher models if they had a higher class of authors and a nobler range of verse. *The poet to reach them must needs to some extent be one of themselves*—must understand their ways of life and forms of speech. . . . They have no peculiar relish for bad spelling or faulty rhyme.¹

Bad spelling and faulty rhyme were not the only ways in which these hacks offended, either: but it seems fair to add that what they lacked in quality they did their best to make up for in quantity (which may not be so bad an alternative as most critics are given to think). At least they supplied a need. In them, as always, we note the absence of any obviously personal style. Occasionally there are touches of nightmarish originality, as in "Village Regulations"—

Ivy up every house, nasturtions all round the back
Large geraniums well cultivated with five green leaves and two black
One coachyard paved with stones that looked like petrified kidney
potatoes

—which may be absolute nonsense but might pass elsewhere as an essay in surrealist writing. Much of this verse is so utterly defiant of any normal criteria that it is often difficult to know whether to dismiss it as worthless or give it the benefit of a

¹ *Quarterly Review*, 1867.

doubt. This, for example, the close of a broadside ode on the death of a not-so-popular prime minister:

We hope now Lord Palmerston
To glory is gone
The 20th day of October
—He was just eighty-one.¹

Is it just Tupperian drivelt? Or is he being sly, half-indicating a good-riddance-to-bad-rubbish attitude? Probably not, but who can be sure?

Catnach retired in 1839: chiefly because there was no need for him to carry on (particularly as he could no longer exercise a monopoly), but partly because he was the first to see the warning light.² Like every other dog, the street-ballad had had its day. As early as 1840 Douglas Jerrold was quite sure that it had been supplanted by the Italianate hurdy-gurdy: and though his lamenting it was somewhat premature it is quite clear that pedlars of broadsheets found it increasingly difficult to compete with the amusement-halls, the newspapers, the penny song-books and the hosts of counter-attractions which had begun to appear. They suffered, too, at the hands of the police (not the first time that the long arm of the law had interfered with activities of this kind, either—men had been hanged for singing ballads, before this). In the provinces, particularly in the market-towns, they continued to be popular until the close of the century. Writing in 1862, Mayhew records an interview with a street-singer who gave it as his opinion that there were at that time no less than 700 men earning their living by this means.³

This commercialization of “rym dogerel” took root in most of the newly industrialized areas, wherever a dense population created a market. In Lancashire there was the Harkness Press: in Glasgow it was the “Poets’ Box” or, as it preferred to call

¹ Quoted in *The Poetry of Seven Dials* (loc. cit.).

² Cf. *Life and Times of James Catnach*.

³ Op. cit.

itself, "The Grand Temple of the Muse, the boast and pride of Millions, the instruction of Nations, the luminary of the whole World" . . . a flourishing concern, compared with which Monroe's Poetry Bookshop seems a very timid and minor enterprise.

Throughout the later decades of Victoria's reign the ballad fell further into disrepute. It had never been "respectable": now it grew more raffish than ever: yet as a commercial proposition it continued to have its possibilities until the First Great War. Mr. Iolo Williams recollects "at the time of the Crippen trial, hearing a man in Cambridge market-place hawking ballads which he recommended with the alluring cry of, 'Here you are! The latest songs! All about the Dirty Doctor!'"¹ And to-day you may still find them being touted as a sideline by corner-vendors of lascivious wares: a sad reflection on the state into which the urban muse has sunk.

* * * * *

Yet another attempt to find an outlet for the oral impulse, to establish a truly popular poetry, had failed. Meantime the literary poets continued to hold themselves apart, maintaining the aristocratic aloofness which had become so habitual. Yeats's "Salley Gardens" was not the only poem to be taken straight from a street-ballad;² nor was Housman above taking a tip from them now and again; but for the most part official verse continued to keep its head in the air, ignoring the wider audience. The hungry sheep looked up and were not fed. Housman knew, as well as any writer, that "meaning is of the intellect, poetry is not",³—that its appeal and potency is primarily physical and should, therefore, be plain to all; but what was he among so many? Hopkins was good (and it was a sure instinct which prompted him to make such use of alliterative stresses), but he lived purely and simply for his own ends:

¹ *English Folksong and Dance*. P. 12.

² Cf. W. Henderson: *op. cit.*, pp. 16-17.

³ *The Name and Nature of Poetry*. P. 38.

he existed in his own right, a phenomenon without affinities or consequences. The promise of the 1914-18 generation was cut short: for them poetry was in the pity. Even Owen was baffled. "All the poet can do to-day is to warn," he said.

The later Georgians were tired or tiresome triflers, lacking awareness. Afterwards came the cynics and obscurantists, the merely clever—sophisticated intellectuals all. . . .

Until the thirties there was no sign that the twentieth-century poet was conscious of, or resented, his weakness: even now he does not fret nearly enough at his convent's narrow room. He has, indeed, "packed his bag and set out for a far country . . . he is flirting with foreign whores—or with ghosts: he has wasted his fortune: he has forgotten how to speak English: he has shamed his father: he has gone mad in the desert: he died some years ago".¹ He is, in truth, such a prodigal. Day Lewis may find as many excuses for him as he pleases: the fact remains that the poet has yet to tackle the real problem, which is to make himself articulate for the masses. "*The boast and pride of Millions*" . . . is that really his ultimate ambition and objective? He is very far from achieving it, certainly, though Auden, Spender, M'Diarmid and others have at times shaped that way.

In an England where nobody was well, in a world that seemed no better than stony rubbish, the pre-War poet was more than ever alone. Attracted by the irreconcilable forces of materialism and idealism, he did not know which way to turn: in any case, neither led to the whole truth.² He was caught between the conflicting fires of ideologies, none of which was wholly convincing. He had inherited an aftermath of scientific theory which he sought to apply in his writing; but however intelligently he used it he remained unintelligible except to the few. Should he give up the attempt and go over to communism?—Art or Propaganda? He must choose between these two,

¹ C. Day Lewis: *A Hope for Poetry*. P. 1.

² Cf. Francis Scarfe: *Auden and After*. P. 186.

apparently. Neither alternative seemed promising: he twisted between the two, never able to reconcile the public and the private motive. Any decision he made had to be made unassisted, without authority.

When all was said and done he was left fiddling with phrases. And words, like everything else, were proving an awkward squad, refusing to answer to his command. The very language itself seemed nerveless, exhausted: he was compelled to use it elliptically, allusively, in a denotive rather than a connotive way; which put him still further in a minority. It made him truculent, his style irritant, non-committal and incisive, leaving his readers clutching at straws, following his meaning at a distance or in a hurt bewilderment. Not that he much cared . . . too often he was content to talk to himself.

It was not entirely *his* fault that poetry had become so difficult. Let the poet himself propound one of the main reasons for his obscurity:

In a word, this is the expansion of the social unit to a size at which it becomes impossible for the individual to have any real contact with his fellows and thus to benefit from the group. Towns, founded by men's desire to live together, now compel them to live separately. The individual has a certain range and radius of sympathy, comprehension, imagination: this radius, for the average man, has slowly enlarged with the progress of civilization: civilization is, in fact, finally to be measured by the diameter of the circle of the "average" man's imagination. All went comparatively well till the beginning of the nineteenth century, when a spate of inventions so swelled the social unit that it burst and disintegrated. Now the successful social unit is one which both adapts itself to the slowly widening circumferences of individual imaginations and is in itself the cause of their extension. The social and the individual unit obviously are interactive, so that with the sudden nightmare

swelling of the former we got a similar morbid growth of the latter. Thus the gravest charge to be laid against the cinema, the radio, the newspaper and the various easy modes of transit is that they are enlarging the field of individual experience so rapidly that communication between centre (soul) and circumference (imagination) is in danger of being snapped. The individual is being pulled out so forcibly in all directions that his personal life is attenuated and dissipated.¹

This is a somewhat vicious-circling argument, but in all fairness we must admit that it has cogency. We are *all* of us in one way or another "psychological cases", hyper-intellectuals. One dimension, the cerebral, has been unnaturally stretched out, the others—emotional, instinctual, unconscious (all that motivates our private-lives)—have run to dangerous seed or suffered atrophy. We in turn may blame our education for making us what we are, caricatures of what we could have been. Whether or not we care to confess as much, we are all cranks, finding meanings only of our own. Individualism, it seems, makes us internequine.

Never before was English society so secretly divided as it was in the last decade. It was not only the connection between the individual personality and its imagination which had snapped: the barriers between the various sectional interests (each an armed camp) made universal communication all but impossible. The poet might well complain that it was impossible for him to regain the sovereign touch: there *was* no common audience; it was like trying to make oneself heard in a Tower of Babel. The breach between Poetry and People, which we have observed widening and deepening through the centuries, had become an impassable gulf.

Even so, we cannot believe that the pre-1939 poets were "doing their best to bridge the gulf from their side".² We cannot help thinking again of Catnach's anonymous ballad-

¹ *A Hope for Poetry*. P. 36.

² *Ibid.* P. 20.

mongers. After all, where they, untalented, achieved a partial success, surely more gifted poets, had they brought themselves to attempt it, would not have failed completely? Nor can we forget those thousands who, not so very long ago, looked to Seven Dials for their inspiration. Even the Victorian critic was not unhopeful that from that underworld there would arise a real poet

content to sing in good plain honest Saxon such topics as *they* love to hear; of men or women great in goodness or in vice; of life and death in their widest sense; of human sorrows and joys, whether in Chick Lane or Windsor Castle. . . . We do not despair of his advent, and the sooner he comes the better for Seven Dials; and for all of us.¹

Such a poet never materialized, but the hope—and the need—persists. There is a place vacant for him (for more than one, too) in the hearts of all of us. The millions are kept waiting. The opportunity remains.

Meantime the War. . . .

Once again the slogans of democracy are being raised: but we are so sick with false hopes that we cannot know whether to believe in them implicitly or to think only that they are dangled ahead to delude us. The atmosphere simmers with rumours of coming reform, nostrums for the future—"social security", "equality of opportunity", charters for this and that . . . we feed on air promise-crammed. Yet out of all this shattering flame and bloody shambles there looms, surely, an Idea—beyond liberty, beyond victory, something infinitely more worth while than a narrow patriotism: the Brotherhood of suffering Humankind?

The idea of the Common Man.

We *must* believe in it. As yet the idea is as vague, as blurred as any idea can be. It lacks expression. Everywhere men feel

¹ *Quarterly Review*: loc. cit.

it in the ferment of their blood and writhe because they feel themselves inarticulate.

In the roar of a falling world there was small time for poetry:—words seemed such little, futile things. So far, the war years have not produced a major genius—not even a Rupert Brooke. So much the better. There must be time for a complete change of heart in individual life, for a thorough rewelding and redirecting of society as a whole. Far better that Poet and People should turn over a new leaf, go step in step together from a new start. It is encouraging to find writers concerning themselves more with clearance work than trying to go on working on the old, rotten foundations: to find manifestos boldly announcing that

Every man has poetry within him.
No man is small enough to be neglected as a poet.
The moment a man starts to write he ceases to live
Intellectualization is only half the truth.¹

By all means let us have a Charter for Poetry: but we will do well to remember that

That cannot be till two agree
Who long have lain apart.

The problem of how the Poet is to *get back* is one which he cannot solve alone: there must be *rapprochements* on all sides. The Society of Common Men, the *novum organum* of to-morrow's world, is at present only a dream, and until it is realized the artistic and cultural impasse must remain.

In this essay we have from time to time cast envious retrospective glances at the mediaeval (afterwards the rural) way of life. It is obviously impossible for our present civilization to return to such an order: but it is not impossible to believe that it must, sooner or later, shake down into some sort of kindred stability. Maybe Maritain is right in thinking that "if a . . . personal society should emerge in modern history, in conditions

¹ From Tambimuttu's first "Letter".

very different from and even the reverse of mediaeval conditions, it is likely none the less to reproduce in an analogous fashion certain characteristics of mediaeval civilization".¹

The moral which we have tried so long and so laboriously to point out is this: that for Poet and People the ultimate solution in poetry and in life alike lies in self-discipline—not in political communism but in a spiritual communalism. It is not inconceivable that Humanum Genus may come through after all, purged in this vortex; that you and I and *he* may yet find a way to recover our lost dignities and graces, recognizing at the last that freedom comes, not from an aggressive independence, but from a mutual interdependence. Every man in his manner, working and playing in saving fellowship . . . with the Poet, the Great Commoner and the Commons working together in honour and understanding. Only when, if ever, that ideal is attained will the two join hands again, to meet in

a country

Where light equal, like the shine from snow,
Strikes all faces. . . .

¹ *Freedom in the Modern World.* P. 55.

APPENDIX

PLEASURES OF SPRING

BY JOHN CLARE

(Transcribed from the Peterborough Museum MSS.)

How beautiful the spring resumes its reign
Breathing her visions o'er the earth again!
The veriest clown that hath a pulse to move
Looks on her smiling face & falls in love.
He plucks the wild flowers scattered from her hand
& feels warm rapture round his heart expand,
Joys of the soul which Nature prompts to seek
—The all of Poesy but its power to speak.
Each bush & tree & sprouting weed is seen
Remembering Spring & darkening into green,
The hedgerow thorn unseals its tender shoots
& arum leaves sprout green about their roots,
The ash-tree swells, its buds as black as jet,
Whose pale green keys are not unfolded yet,
The sallow glistens in its gay palm-blooms
Studded with golden dust where earliest come
The solitary wild-bees that survive
Their trance & keep their feeble songs alive.
The rifted elm from cloathing Spring receives
Its hop-like, pale forerunners of the leaves
& tasselled catkins on the hazels cling,
The woodman's genial prophecys of Spring.

There is a calm divinity of joy
Breaths rapture round o'er everyone's employ.
The Poet feels it 'neath some forward bush
The first in leaf to hide the singing thrush
There, cutting open with heart-beating speed
Some book, just purchased, which he loves to read,
Which warm anticipation sought so long.
The Lover feels it in some secret place
Shut out from all but one endearing face,

The idol of his heart, that peerless maid
who walks, a goddess, in the secret shade,
Whose fairey form, replete with every charm
Thrills to his heart while hanging on his arm,
Listing with downward smile some tender tale
Or sudden song of early nightingale.
Bewitching Woman!, what a boon of bliss
Hangs round thy loveliness in spots like this.
When Woman speaks Man's heart, delighted, hears
Chaste conversations coupled with meek fears.
Her innocence from wrong her heart defends,—
Her smiles would change e'en savages to friends.
In earthly charms she rivals heaven above
For what were angels without woman's love?

The Hind, too, feels the happiness of Spring,
Chopping the wattling hedge while linnets sing
Around his labour all the livelong day
& flowers spring up, the chronicles of May.

The Boy too breaths it from the common air
While hurrying onward to the distant fair
In such glad haste as scarce can give him time
In neighbouring bush for peeping nest to climb
Or cowslip bunch that greets his eager view
About the meadows which he journeys through;
& Shepherd Boy as soon as e'er he finds
The brook untroubled with the winter winds
Trims up his pole & hunts in April's storms
The coudung hillocks on the moor for worms,
Scarce giving patience leave his hook(s) to trim
E'er in he throws it from the weedy brim
Bent o'er the leaning willow hour by hour
His chair for rest & house to shun a shower.

The Husbandman, to see each freshening sight
Feels his heart warm & flutter with delight
&, cheerful mid the lengthening days' turmoils
Mingles full many a ballad with his toils—
Those rude old themes his fathers sung with pride
Lost & half buried to the world beside
That wed a few fond hearts & linger on
Like sweet old poets when their fame is gone.

Each feels the bliss on toil or leisure fall
 Bestowed by Spring who offers it to all.
 Each flower again smiles thro' its veil of dew
 Like lovely abscent faces seen anew
 Rich with the same perfumes & luscious smiles
 They wake again our leisure to beguile,
 Like an old tale of pleasure told again
 After long years of desolating pain.
 No fashions change their smell & hue, the same
 (With memory old acquaintances proclaim
 To manhood's withered root of faded joy)
 As when they met us while it bloomed a boy.
 Primroses among thorns now make their home
 Like timid beautys shunning all that come
 & lilys-of-the-valley weeping dew
 Live in their loneliness the season through
 Save when a lovesick breeze with amorous sigh
 Lifts their green veils to kiss them, passing bye.
 The bank of trees puts gayer liveries on
 & varied hues thro' woodland thickets run.
 The blackthorn deepens in a darker stain
 & brighter freckles hazle shoots regain.
 The woodland rose in bright array is seen
 Whose bark recieves, like leaves, a vivid green;
 & foulroyce twigs as red as stock-dove's claws
 Shine(s) in the woods to gain the bard's applause,
 While the old oak's rude bulks in vigour warms
 & mealy powder cloaths his rifted Arms.

In spots like these the Shepherd loves to fling
 His careless limbs 'neath the young leaves of Spring,
 To muse upon some wild brook's hasty streams
 & idly revel over waking dreams,—
 Or, stretched in careless mood upon his back
 To view the blue sky & its sweeping rack,
 Lifting his fancies to each passing cloud
 & shaping every one that journeys proud
 O'er its mysterious way to forms & things
 That Fancy's visions to his memory brings
 Some like to rocks gleam on his wondering eye
 'Mid shoreless seas & some go swifter bye
 Like ships that onward other worlds pursue

O'er bounding billows of a different hue,—
Soft as the paper ships he used to make
& float in boyhood on each summer lake,
Some, white like pallaces of marble, seem
The towers of Heaven, scaled in many a dream
& to his waking fancys grandly shine
The abodes of One whom instinct owns divine,—
Some like to mountains shadow high & some
Like the dear vales that nestle round his home
With cots & groves & fountains streaming bye
Spreading long Edens to the musing eye;
And thus he dreams away his idle hours
Stretched 'mid the totter-grass & nodding flowers
& wishing often on his mossy bed
For the lark's wings, that whistles o'er his head,
To realize his glowing dreams & flye
To the soft bosom of that sunny sky
To trace the seeming vales & mountains there
Which hopeless height personifys so fair,
For in the raptures of his warm delight
Man's reason keeps its wisdom out of sight
Leaving the sweets of Fancy running wild
& half remains, as he hath been, a child.

By Spring's warm winds & gleaming smiles awoke
The noisy frogs in flaggy marshes croak
Of frostbound prisons fled & freedom won;
And by each bank that freshens in the sun
The snake curls up asleep or crooks along
Frighting the schoolboy from his sports & song
Who peeps for nests in the half-feathered hedge
& picks for pootys from the rustling sedge.

The prophet(s) of the spring darts down the brook
& scarcely gives the shepherd time to look.
In glad suspense he smiles & guesses on
If t'was a swallow or his dream of one
Until the bird, as to convince the swain,
Shortens his speed & circles round again.
O'er fallow fields & moores of russet hue
Pewets again their restless flights renew
& swoop around with harsh & shrilly cry

O'er swains at plough or shepherds wandering bye.
The schoolboy hears them with a mixed delight
Of hopes & pleasures & at morn & night
Spends many a leisure hour the meadow's guest
In fruitless searches for their hidden nest.
The gay woodpecker with its glossy wing
Green as the plumage of returning Spring
Bores at decaying trees with wakening joys
& gives Spring welcome with its jarring noise,
Till startled by the noise of passing clowns,
Then off it bounces in its ups & downs.

The Landrail now resumes its haunts again
Whom herdboys listen & pursue in vain.
Its creaking noise how often when a child
I've heard & followed with delusions wild,
Wading knee-deep the downy grass among
Startling grasshoppers from their idle song.
How I have tracked the close & meadow ground
Listening & following the deluding sound
That onward still its creaking note renewed
Nor nearer seemed than when I first pursued.
Hunt where I would or listen as I might
T'was here & there & ever out of sight—
A very Spirit to my wandering thought
Heard on but never to be seen or caught.
So, wearied with the chase, I turned away
& sought new pleasure in my former play
Believing it some fairey left by night
To wander, blinded by the sunny light.

The partridge 'mid the wheat that snugly shields
His russet plumage, gladdens in the fields
& home-bound hinds at sunset's dewy fall
Hears once again its well-known evening call.

Tho these as simple trifles merely seem
To those whose souls are dead to every dream
That wakening Spring throws round them,—there are some
Within whose bosom Nature find(s) a home
That deem them sweetest themes because they bring
The untutored music of returning Spring.

Spring's joys are universal & they fall
 From an unsparing bounty blessing all.
 The meanest thing that lives to crawl or flye
 Has equal claims in Her impartial eye.
 Obscure & mean as they may seem to some
 She always finds a pathway to their home.
 E'en the coy hare, blest with Her cheering smile
 Sinks from its buried solitudes awhile
 From woodland lanes (all Winter's wants could find)
 Where brown sedge whistled to the res(t)less wind
 To clover leas & there it squats to play
 In timid raptures, dewy hours away
 Till danger's shadow haunt its nimble eye
 & startling nethered boy goes whooping bye.
 Then off it scampers 'mid the shielding grain
 Till all is still & out it skips again;
 And the wild rabbit, less reserved & coy
 Squats on the heath's thyme-hills in nibbling joy
 & crafty, for the blackthorn holts among
 Plays round its den like kittens¹ with her young.

March brought a little flower Spring loves to wear,
 The brightest jewel in her shining hair
 That, like the daisy(s), wears a lowly head
 & scarcely peers above its grassy bed;
 & mingling in their blooms they shine afar
 An earthly sky of gold & silver stars.
 Like them, its open book smiles thro the day
 & shuts at eve like pleasure tired of play.
 In botany it claims an humble shrine
 & wears the name of "lesser celandine"
 But by another name the shepherd swain
 Marks it on young Spring's dewy paths again,—
 With village boys he calls it buttercup
 Yet not the one with which the faireys sup
 That holds at night the nectar drops of dew
 To cheer their mirth the feasting season thro
 Which proudly leaves the grass to meet the sun
 & waits till Summer hath its reign begun.
 With head less haughty this is taught to shine
 Of looks bewitching & of hues divine.

¹ Sic.

It early comes & glads the shepherd's eye
 Like a bright star spring-tempted from the sky
 Reflecting on its leaves the sun's bright rays
 That sets its pointed glories in a blaze,
 So bright that children's fancies it deceives
 Who think that sunshine settles in its leaves
 &, playful, hold it 'neath each other's chins
 To see it stain with gold their lily skin
 & he who seems to win the brightest spot
 Feels future wealth & fortune as his lot

Ah happy Childhood with that sunny brow!—
 No wealth can match what Nature gives thee now
 &, like these blossoms of the golden bloom
 Thy Spring *must* fade tho' Summer's wealth *may* come.

From every village, groups of merry boys
 Throng field & meadow seeking after joys
 & many a littered flower & broken bough
 Wear the rude marks of their intrusions now;
 & moss & feathers scattered here & there
 With birds left mourning o'er their sad despair
 Bespeak their young intrusions every day
 & show the ravage of their tyrant-play.
 With eager speed to woodland shades they rush
 & peep around the pasture's stumpy bush,
 Pushing the boughs aside with eager haste
 & climbing bushes that conceal a nest.
 Tho' thorns full oft their little deeds chastise
 & prick their fingers e'er they gain the prize
 The deepest wound costs but a tear or sigh
 & new-found nests soon warm such sorrows dry.
 Thus on they sport till liberty expires
 & school again each runaway requires
 To con his thumb-soiled book with many a sigh
 Oft turning to the door an anxious eye
 Where sunbeams flicker thro' upon the walls
 & sparrows chirp with freedom's welcome calls,
 Picturing restraint more irksome to the mind
 & heightening pleasures which they left behind.
 Noisy marauders of the plashey green,—
 Now spitefull geese with their young broods are seen

Nibbling the morning grass bejewelled with dew
As yellow as the flowers they wander through
Or, rippling o'er the pond in twittering glee
Chasing each waterflye or crossing bee
While their protectors watch with wary eye
Each fancied enemy that passes bye,
Hissing & gabbling, frightening far away
The meddling children as they pass to play.
E'en dogs will lose their independent pride
& drop their tails & fearing turn aside.

Now walks the Man of Taste among the woods
& fields; & where small runnels rill their floods
Loud-laughing on their errands watering flowers.
And down the narrow lanes he walks for hours
All carpeted anew with young silk-grass
So soft that birds hear not the feet that pass
Close by their nests. He peeps the leaves among
& marks with rapture how they brood their young
Then drops beneath the bushes to peruse
A pocket-poet of some favoured muse
Then plucks a primrose from its leafy bed
To place between the pages that he read
Instead of doubling down to mark the place.
& lye, a relic in Time's withered space,
Reminding him as seasons take to wing
What joys he felt in such a spot in Spring.
With such sweet essence of Earth's fading fruits
His soul is chronicled above the brutes
Such fine ideas that make(s) life sublime
& gain(s) a look in Heaven before its time
For heaven is happiness & he enjoys
That happy dream who so his mind employs.
He has his favourite bush & favourite tree
& nooks on commons where he loves to be.
He makes his favourite bank a summer seat
& posts & stones he'll leave his path to greet
Where Time with mossy prophecys presage(s),
They are her favoured patriarchs for age.
The stick he leans on was a favourite shoot
That ten years back was severed from the root
Of some prize relic or boy-favoured tree

& keeps it still his daily friend to be.
With such a waste of happiness he meets.
As, like a bee he strays, collecting sweets
& gleans right covetous & never tires
But thro the day-spring saunters & admires
& when the night comes on his fancies wear
A wish to lodge with birds & still be there.

How beautiful the wind awakes & flings
Disordered graces o'er the face of things!
Stirring the shorter grass in twittering gleams
Like rippling shadows over shallow streams
& waving that which grows more rank & high
In deepening waves of darker majesty,—
A green & living sea in life arrayed
Wave rolling over wave, shade chasing shade
In every different grade of stirring hue
More swifter than the swallow can pursue
Who journeys low & rapid o'er the lea
& seemly swims along the summer sea.
The brushing billows rush o'er passing feet
As waves are broken o'er the rocks they meet
The woods, too, round the landscape roll, a sea
Of varied hues & wild intensity
Heaving fantastic on the wandering eye
Hugh swelling billows to the smiling sky.
Here oft the poet wanders & employs
His leisure midst this wilderness of joys,
Seeking the spots his heart the most approves
& wild-grown pastures which he dearly loves,—
The common, furze-clad heath all wild, where sheep
Paddle their thousand tracks & rabbits leap
Playfully battering every little hill
Thrown up by moles that burrow at their will,
Where tracks of waggons mark the vagrant sward
That claims no fence or ownership regard(s).
Yet Nature cloaths it o'er with tasteful care
In garments which the May is proud to wear,—
Furze never out of blossom & the broom
That rivals sunshine with their (its) golden bloom
Where mossy brooks their shallow floods distill
Forcing their way & wandering at their will.

Here thoughts run wild by starts in various moods
Now eddying as the runnel through the woods
Dallying with pleasant things as if with leaves
Then starts & wider space its glow receives,
Like cataracts led with hurried eager ire
As almost kindles water into fire.
His thoughts rush out with joys unfelt before
& maddening raptures make his soul run o'er
With its divine conceptions till they rise
Forgetting earth & mix with Paradise.

Now long & green grows every laughing day
Till clouds seem weary with their length of way
& when the evening in her leisure comes
Night threats no terrors in its winter glooms
That prompted dismal tales round sooty hearth
& midnight murders left small room for mirth,
Revealed by many a horrid, screaming ghost
As heard by travellers upon wild heaths lost
Or seen in ancient rooms by folks abed
To draw the curtains with quick hand tho' dead
& walk the staircase with unearthly tread
Making each listener's very flesh to creep
& men & children even dread to sleep.
Night throws the mantle by she wildly wore
& Winter like a wizard reigns no more
Borrowing the voices of the bursting wind
To howl its dreads on the benighted hind
Who heard in tempests ringing o'er his head
Ten thousand yells to stop him as he fled.
These all have fled, their sabbath glooms to keep
Till desolate Winter startles them from sleep.
In spellbound caves & charnel vaults they hide
Where bats are bred & dreadful dreams abide.
Eve cometh now with her attendant moon
As pleasant as a cloudy day in June
& daylight ever stays the whole night long
To list the nightingale's unsleeping song
& Night, grim tyrant in Fear's dread parade
Is now a bankrupt, broken in his trade.

The winds play harmless in the fledging bowers
Soft as the motion of the shaken flowers
Disturbing not the young moth's easy flight
That steals to kiss the sleeping flowers at night.
The clouds in beautiful order thro the sky
Veil & not hide the moonlight passing bye
Mantled in beautiful forms that seem to be
The travelling spirits of eternity.

The Husbandman, released from toiling day
Muses in pleasure on his homeward way,
Oft gazing on the pale moon's peaceful face
& pictures there a quiet resting place
Deeming it Heaven or something near akin
To what all wishes are so warm to win
When dark hereafter takes him as her guest.
He deems that place a sabbath-land of rest
Thinking his soul shall gather wing & flye
To that pale Eden on the soft blue sky.

The lingering Milkmaid now, tho far from town
Loiters along & sets her bucket down
Nor starts at shouts that meet her listening ear
For happy Hope takes place of every fear
& paints her love in every object round
& Fancy hears his voice in every sound.

The Boy ne'er mends his pace but soodles on
Blessing the moonlight when the day is gone
& even dares to pause amid the shade
Of the old ruined castle undismayed
To mark the change,—that some few weeks ago
Hid its blank walls in draperys of snow,—
Marking in joy on its once naked tower
Snub elders greening & full many a flower
Of Bloodwalls glowing with rich tawny streaks
Blushing in beauty from the gaping creeks
Swarthy yet lovely, by each zepher fanned
As the soft cheek(s) of maidens summer-tanned,—
Wreaths Nature loves round Ruin's brows to bind
From seeds took thither by the birds & wind.
He views those garlands & seems struck the while

That things so abject should be seen to smile
Oft turning to the moon a wondering eye
That seems to journey with him through the sky,
Moves as he moves & stops as glad the while
To wait his leisure while he climbs the stile.
He walks, it walks—and keeps his every pace—
Runs when he runs & glories in the race.
He tries his utmost speed to leave behind
His shining friend & thinks he beats the wind
For swiftness as he pants & hurries on
Inly exulting that the race is won;
But spite of every vale & weary hill
He passed & clomb so swift, it followed still
& while he hums o'er each old tune he loves
Do as he will, it moveth as he moves.
Swift as his thoughts, his speed is all in vain,—
He turns to look & there it is again
Plump opposite him, gleaming pale & wan
As near as when his eager race began.
He thinks on the long ways he left behind
& vain, wild notions fill his puzzled mind
The gossip-tales that Winter did supply
Urge their faint shadows on his gazing eye
& the pale shades that cloud the moon so wan
His artless fancys fashion(s) to a man.
Oft has he heard at night when toil was done
Rude tales of jiants dwelling in the moon
& this as one of those his mind supplies
That takes his nightly journeys through the skies.
So here he stops nor urges speed again
Deeming a race with jiants doubly vain.

Now many an eve in moods of simple praise
The Hind, right thankful for the lengthening days,
Will o'er his Bible in rich musings lean
That's wrapt in baize to keep the covers clean
Noting with joy as on he reads to see
The truth & power of sacred Poesy.
Those texts of Spring he gets by heart, to tell
His fellows, which describe the time so well,—
As "now the time of singing birds is come"
& "lilys among thorns do make their home",

“The winter’s past, the rain is o’er & gone.”
These are the texts that lead his raptures on,—
“The vine shoots forth & yields a goodly smell.”
He finds no book that tells the time so well.
& ere he goes to bed, in humble ways
He breaths a prayer & fervently he prays
For blessings on his family around
That in the sooty corner sit, profound,
Begging alike to bear the worst when sent
All breath “Amen” & go to bed content.
Prayers are the wings by which the soul doth flye
To gather blessings from the bountious sky
& they are blest whose days thus calmly wear,
Each met in hope & finished with a prayer.

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